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The New York Review of Science Fiction

www.nyrsf.com

July 2003
Number 179
Vol. 15, No. 11: \$4.00

Anna Sunshine Ison From Santo to Sainthood: The Wrestler as Fantastic Force

Since its very inception, professional wrestling has been, like carnival freak shows, parades, and certain religious ceremonies, one of those few cultural phenomena that celebrate, or even assert the existence of, the fantastic. In fact, it was at carnivals and country fairs that the catch-as-catch-can style of wrestling, which evolved into the sport we know today, began to overtake its regulation-laden Greco-Roman cousin in popularity (Ball 41). In *Wrestling to Reason: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien tell of the peripatetic wrestler who would move from town to town taking on locals. "After sufficient wagers were placed, the local hero would lose a close match rather than be overwhelmed by the itinerant grappler" (20). Eventually, both competitors were professionals, who would begin the fight fairly, see which of them became the audience favorite, and allow him the victory (Ball 43). Since then, although wrestling has abandoned the carnival in favor of the arena and the television studio, it retains its sense of the carnivalesque. Wrestling constantly borrows from the fantastic for its language, its colorful heroes and villains, and its sense of epic struggle. In exchange, wrestlers have slowly but surely begun to find a place of their own in the canon of fantastic individuals, alongside superheroes, monsters, and gods.

The biggest question in wrestling is to what extent its moves, outcomes, and even injuries are spontaneous and to what extent they are scripted. Scholars and fans alike have tried to come up with some definitive rubric to measure the degree of reality in wrestling, but the sport defies any easy attempt to categorize it. No one imagines that all wrestling fans are dupes. Instead, we assume that, as is true for spectators of the fantastic, the state which best describes the wrestling fan is one of willing (albeit temporary) suspension of disbelief.

In his seminal essay, "The World of Wrestling," semiotologist Roland Barthes writes, "There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle" (15). After all, that very aspect of wrestling which has invited so much derision—its lack of credibility as a sport—has allowed it to be analyzed as one might analyze a work of art or literature. (Indeed, the main scholarly focus on wrestling tends to be on it not as sport, but as morality play, folkloric narrative, and ritual drama.)

Wrestling's scripted nature means that, even insists that, there be clearly delineated heroes (babyfaces in wrestling parlance) and villains (or heels). It further insists that any competition be seen not as a contest of ability between individuals but as a personal, emotional struggle, or even as a moral battle between forces of good and evil. The difference between professional and amateur wrestling, in fact between professional wrestling and any traditional sport, can be stripped down to the fact that in traditional sports, the heroes and the villains of the game are subjective and depend on the background of the individual spectators. If you are watching a football game between the Packers and the Bears, which team you perceive as the hero and which you perceive as the villain depends very simply on where your allegiances lie. In wrestling, although from time to time babyfaces

Special Who Was That Masked Man Issue

Anna Sunshine Ison on Fantasies of Wrestling
Alice K. Turner & Walter Minkel Approach
Diana Wynne Jones with Enthusiasm
Darrell Schweitzer's Funereal Adventures
Jenny Blackford Reads the Wolfe Suns Entire
Eugene Reynolds on Jeffrey Ford's Stories
Damien Broderick on Cory Doctorow's Kingdom
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Plus Screen on Prejudice & an Editorial!

In Praise of Diana Wynne Jones

I
Alice K. Turner

Reading Diana Wynne Jones

Just at the start of this year's Oscar program, with no fanfare whatever, the award for the best animated feature was given to Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. No one appeared to collect the statue, and the program hurried on, but it was a great moment of vindicated faith for fans. Among these are Michael Andre-Driussi, William Anley, and me; from our separate venues we had been speculating for weeks on whether the Disney juggernaut would crush all opposition, or whether sheer quality would for once prevail. We had been preparing for the next movie too; while waiting for Oscar we all read *Howl's Moving Castle*, by Diana Wynne Jones, and, in enthusiastic e-mails pronounced it worthy.

No conceivable American moviemaker would touch this strange book, and it should be a challenge even for a wizard like Miyazaki, though it curiously seems to suit him. Here are the bones of the situation: Three sisters live in an alternate England, Ingary, where magic is not at all unknown. Sophie, the eldest, has taken over their parents' hat shop. And a moving castle has arrived on the outskirts of town, never in the same place twice. In it lives the Wizard Howl, a Byronicque figure (rather like the young David Bowie) with a reputation for preying on young women. An ominous figure called the Witch of the Waste periodically threatens the town; one afternoon she comes into Sophie's shop and, in a fit of pique, turns Sophie into a 90-year-old woman, which she remains for virtually the entire novel. She takes a job as Howl's housekeeper, living in the castle with him, his apprentice Michael, and his resident fire-demon, Calcifer, who is under a spell himself. And the plot moves on from there, full of complications and turning partly on John Donne's famous poem that starts, "Go and catch a falling star." (If you'll recall, Robert Graves made rather a lot of that poem in *The White Goddess*; too, Wynne Jones's approach here—that there are legitimate clues in the poem—is quite similar.)

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued on page 4)

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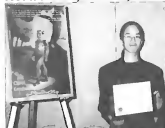
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The New York Review of Science Fiction

ISSUE #170 July 2003

Volume 15, No. 11 ISSN #1052-9438

FEATURES

- Anna Sunshine Ison: From Santo to Sainthood: The Wrestler as Fantastic Force: 1
 Alice K. Turner: In Praise of Diana Wynne Jones I: Reading Diana Wynne Jones: 1
 Jenny Blackford: Reading Gene Wolfe's *Return to the Whorl*: 9
 Darrell Schweitzer: Funeral Games: Thoughts Upon the Death of a Bookseller: 19

REVIEWS

- In Praise of Diana Wynne Jones II: *The Merlin Conspiracy*, reviewed by Walter Minkel: 5
 Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, reviewed by Damien Broderick: 11
 James D. Macdonald's *The Apocalypse Door*, reviewed by Keith Mutzman: 13
 Linda Nagata's *Memory*, reviewed by Greg L. Johnson: 13
 Nancy Kress's *Crossfire*, reviewed by Paul Kincaid: 14
 Poul Anderson's *For Love and Glory*, reviewed by Joe Sanders: 15
 K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City*, reviewed by Faren Miller: 15
 Jeffrey Ford's *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*, reviewed by Eugene Reynolds: 16
 Midori Snyder's *Hannah's Garden*, reviewed by Michael Levy: 21
 Naomi Kritzer's *Fires of the Faithful*, reviewed by Gwyneth Jones: 22

PLUS

Plus: A meaty Screed (22) and a rain-soaked editorial (24)

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 Special thanks to Tavis Allison, Moshe Feder, Christine Giordano, Avram Grumer, Arthur D. Hlavaty,
 Joshua Kronengold, Keith Mutzman, Lisa Padol, Matthew Stevens, and Paul Witcover, Readings Curator.

Published monthly by Dragon Press, P.O. Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

\$4.00 per copy. Annual subscriptions: U. S. Bulk Rate, \$36.00; Canada, \$38.00; U. S. First Class, \$42.00
 Overseas Air Printed Matter, UK & Europe, \$47.00; Asia & Australia, \$48.00. Domestic institutional subscriptions \$40.00.
 Please make checks payable to Dragon Press, and payable in U.S. funds.

An up-to-date index of back issues available in Excel format: Email <nrysf@attglobal.net> to request one.

New York Review of Science Fiction Home Page: www.nrysf.com

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In Praise of Diana Wynne Jones

continued from page 1

It's a very visual book, with lots of aspects that are perfect for animated film, starting with the moving castle itself. (You can see Miyazaki's version of it, very different from the Wynne Jones original, at www4.lawson.com/ghibli/ghibli_moc.shtml; click on the small picture on the right for the 3-D model.) Each door leading out of the castle goes to a different place altogether, even a different dimension, including Wales, here on Earth. Calcifer, always burning in the hearth, but always changing too, should be beautiful. Howl dresses like a rock star, when he has a tantrum he is covered in green slime (that's a very Miyazaki-ready joke). There's a threatening turnip-headed scarecrow, a yattering skull, a bespelled dog-man, and some interesting cases of mixed identity. Sophie goes to visit a king in a palace, and has a ride in a coach with all royal accoutrements—lots to look at.

Still, the big question is—will American audiences sit still for an animated movie where the heroine is 90, even a fast-moving, funny (the book is funny), and handsome movie? It's different in the book where we share Sophie's thoughts and know that she's still Sophie underneath. I guess it depends on how she's drawn. Read the book and decide for yourselves, it's a good read, maybe a little hasty at the end where all the plot points are wrapped up, but that doesn't matter. Howl is an intriguing character, far more irritable and three-dimensional than most fantasy heroes and potentially far and away the best male character Miyazaki has ever undertaken.

There's a sequel to this book called *Castle in the Air*. It didn't need a sequel, and it certainly didn't need this one, which is told in Arabian Nights mode, complete with djinns and magic carpets. (*Howl* is thoroughly Northern European throughout, in whatever dimension.) Howl, Sophie, and Calcifer turn up toward the end, adding nothing much and seeming not at all comfortable with the circumstances. I suspect that her publisher talked Wynne Jones into "sequelizing" it when she was already two-thirds done. The first book must have sold well, and the idea was to ride on its coattails. Bad idea. Not recommended.

Recommended, however, is a book even further out in left field than *Howl's Moving Castle*. In *Archer's Goon*, 13-year-old Howard Sykes comes home from school one day with his little sister Awful (an accurate description). In the kitchen, filling most of it, and making Fifi, the 30 pair, very nervous indeed, is a very large man with enormous feet and a very small head, the Goon. Why is he there? In Goon-speak "Sykes got behind with his payment. Archer wants his two thousand. Here to collect it." After initial consternation, it turns out that Quentin, Howl's writer dad, years ago promised a mysterious man (not Archer) 2,000 quents every three months, in exchange for no more writers' block. Quentin, when he arrives, first fixes 2,000 (copying is a no-no) then indignantly swears he won't write another word. And the Goon won't leave without his quota.

Howard and Awful soon discover that Archer is one of seven cunning wizards who "farm" their town: criminal Shine, elegant Dillan, tantrum-throwing Torquil, sewer-ruling Erskine, Hathaway who lives in the past, and Venturus, who lives in an unexpected future. If Archer gets the 2,000 quents, he'll rule the world (or "farm" it), but if he doesn't then any of his siblings could. What do they need the quents for? And how can a pair of kids foil a bunch of very determined wizards? Some people aren't quite who they claim to be; some aren't even who they think they are. It adds up to an amusing and unusual novel, a safe bet for a kid Howard's age, but I liked it too.

On several of her jackets, Wynne Jones is quoted as saying, "Each time I write a book, I try to say something new, with the result that each book turns out differently from the ones before—which surprises and pleases me in about equal proportions." From my own browsing through her books, this appears to be true. For instance, I read two of the so-called Dalemek Quartet, and if I hadn't been told they were in a series I'd never have guessed. She does, however, have a number of tropes that she uses frequently—I suppose you'd have to, to be so prolific (more than 40 books). One of these is the secret or sometimes not-so-secret cabal of powers that run things or "farm" them, as above; sometimes she gets into gaming

mode with this device (she has three sons, and presumably knows a thing or two about gaming). Another that she's fond of is parallel worlds or universes, and she uses them almost exactly as Philip Pullman does in *His Dark Materials*, though there's no question that Wynne Jones got there first. (She's been writing for 33 years.)

The *Homeward Bounders* uses both of these. The premise is fairly simple. A nosy boy barges in on two men (demons?) he will learn to call *Them*, who are playing the equivalent of a multi-player computer game. It takes *Them* almost no time to decide that he has seen too much. One says, "You are now a discard. We have no further use for you in play. You are free to walk the Bounds as you please, but it will be against the rules for you to enter play in any world. The rules also state that you are allowed to return Home if you can."

And Jamie is flung into play in one world after another. At irregular intervals, from a few weeks to a few years in subjective time, one of *Them* makes a move, and the *Homeward Bounder*—Jamie—is twiddled across a Boundary into another universe. It takes him years to learn the ropes, but all this time he remains physically about 13. At first he is trapped in a closed cycle of six worlds, one of which is dreadful, but eventually he learns how to break out and at last meets some of his fellow Bounders. The first is the Flying Dutchman, who saves him from near-drowning—he's been around a long time! The second is Prometheus—even longer! And the Wandering Jew turns up too, a cantankerous old soul. But he does meet some people more or less his own age, and eventually they figure out a winning strategy.

A much more complicated parallel-world game-novel is *Hesword*. Here the equivalent of *Them* or the "farmers" are the Reigners, five of them, bad hats all. The plot twists are so byzantine in this one, with multiple identities, "theta-space," a "paratypical field" induced by a "Bannus," tricks with time, voices in the head, galactic plotting et cetera, that I'm not going to attempt to summarize it. It's fun, though confusing, and the heroine, Ann (sometimes) is appealingly cranky.

Instead I'll move on to two novels set in the Multiverse, the universe in the shape of Infinity, like a figure-eight laid on its side. Here the Magids (mostly good guys, for once, and all human) are more or less in charge; in addition to other duties, they guide "the flow of magic from world to world." In *Deep Secret*, the Magid assigned to Earth and also to the turbulent planets of the Koryfonic Empire needs to recruit a new Magid to oversee Earth so that he can get to the Empire before it falls apart in the wake of the Emperor's assassination. Where to find such a person? Where but at an if-convention? *Naturflesh*. And wouldn't you know it, the true heir to the Koryfonic Empire is there too, in disguise as an ordinary English boy.

Wynne Jones is obviously no stranger to cons, and she has a lot of fun with PhantasmsCon, which just happens to be sited on a magical node of power. (A centaur shows up, and the admiring comment is, "Fantastic costume!") *Deep Secret* was published as an adult novel, which means there is a wee bit of sex, but it's more hinted at than actually lubricious. The adult listing does let loose her sense of humor, to laugh-aloud effect—anyone who's ever attended a con should get a kick out of it. Magid Rupert plays straight man to an increasingly zany cast, while the intricate plot whirls around his ears to climax at the big Guest of Honor banquet. The book is not strictly a comedy—it has highly serious moments—but it comes close, and has some great characters: the appalling Koryfonic Empress Janine is worth the price of admission.

After *Deep Secret* (1997) Wynne Jones seemingly went into retirement, so it's a pleasure to report that a new book came out just last month. The *Merlin Conspiracy* gets a YA listing, but it too is set in the Multiverse, and Nick Mallory, an important featured player in *Deep Secret*, is a principal here, alternating chapters with Roddy (Arnimhrod) Hyde, daughter of the court weather wizard of the Islands of Blest, an alternate England. (Roddy's pal Grundo is also a principal but doesn't narrate as he's completely dyslexic and can't write a straight sentence.)

The *Merlin Conspiracy* is another winner, satisfyingly long and complex, an epic fantasy with a cast of thousands, all seemingly related to one another or divorced from each other. It offers murder,

treachery, conspiracy, sorcery, battles, poison, and magical spells, as well as computers, telephones, television, and helicopters—like *Deep Secret* it's "modern." Also Little People, a Wild Hunt (of sorts), invisible floating people, giant personified cities (including London), King Arthur (for a page or two), a panther, a hunting cat, chickens, hundreds of salamanders, a remarkable goat, a fearsome dragon, and a very charming talking elephant.

The plot more or less pivots on the fact that Blest has a new Merlin; the Merlin's job is to keep Blest healthy while King and court are on the move in a constant Progress around the country. This Merlin, a certified nerd, seems to have fallen in with a bunch of bad guys. And our heroes, together with some other interesting characters they meet along the way, must thwart them. One of these is Romanov, the "magical supremo," who can do things most magic users have never even thought of. He lives "on an island made from at least ten different universes in at least seven different centuries." Romanov is linked to both Nick and Grundo in different ways.

Another is "a skinny, white-haired old drunk" who bids Nick meet three folk in need and give them what help he can before he can get where he wants to go, which at this point is home. And the first of these is Roddy. "You want me to come and help sort out your country for you?" Nick asks incredulously. Well, yes. But he can't let his help be the other two charges, the second of which is Mini, the elephant.

Nick and Mini reach Romanov's island, built to escape his ex-

wife. The drunk turns up again just in time to help Nick cover up a grisly murder—and turns out to be Blest's chief Magid, as well as a best-selling thriller writer on Earth, also Roddy's grandfather. He cures Romanov of a pernicious ailment, and the island, also ailing, perks up. (But even at the island's worst moments there is always plenty of elephant food.)

More and more characters appear, including a pair of horrible nine-year-old girl twins, Roddy's cousins, but related spiritually to Aww!; because there are two of them they are stereophonically even more awful. The wicked conspirators prepare to take over Blest at a ghastly ceremony at Stonehenge. All the good witches and mages (like Roddy's parents) have disappeared. Roddy has misunderstood the directive of a Little Person; Nick has inadvertently awakened a dangerous creature. Will the good guys arrive in time to save the day?

In short, it's a thumping good adventure yarn with dozens of twists and turns, a mystery as well as a fantasy, with plenty of comedy for fun and a touch of horror for scares. Novels as dense and complex as the two Multiverse books give especially good value, as nearly all readers will want to go back to see what they missed the first time around. Welcome back, Ms. Wynne Jones—how about another one?

Alice K. Turner is *coeditor*, with Michael Andre-Dussut, of *Snake's-heads: The Fiction of John Crowley*.

II

The Merlin Conspiracy by Diana Wynne Jones

New York: Greenwillow, 2003; \$16.99 hc; 468 pages

reviewed by **Walter Minkel**

Who can't love a parallel-worlds story with a talking elephant named Mini? Who can't, in particular, love it when that talking elephant carries your heroes on a howdah between worlds? So asks Alice K. Turner in her review of *The Merlin Conspiracy* in the May 11, 2003, *Washington Post Book World*, and I agree with her wholeheartedly. She also calls it Wynne Jones's "Big, Baggy Book" (dare I say elephantine!), and it's that, too.

Wynne Jones is a fascinating figure in modern British fantasy literature. Her publishers market her books to young people, schools, and libraries, but they've been popular with adult fans since her first fantasies appeared in the 1970s. According to her fan site, <www.lemac.freemove.co.uk>, she published a nonfantasy, *Changewater*, in 1970, but the first Wynne Jones book that "really counts" is *Willow's Tooth* (published in the US as *Witch's Business*) from 1973. Since then she's published several series—the best known of them probably being the Chrestomanci stories and the Dalemarch Quartet.

Many of her fans, including yours truly, at first felt that she was handed a raw deal when J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series became the explosion they did—not because the Potter books were bad, but because Wynne Jones's books are so much better. It was only later that I realized that the Potter stories may have given Wynne Jones a bigger following than ever. Hundreds of libraries and bookstores, besieged by young people who had read all the Potter books, issued "What to Read When You've Read All the *Harry Potter* Books" lists, and on almost every one of them was the name Diana Wynne Jones, and often listing not just one, but several of her titles. (I personally recommend *Dogbody*, *Archer's Goat*, and *How's My Magic Castle?*) That means that more readers than ever will be out looking for any new book arriving under her name.

One of Wynne Jones's trademarks is the way she parodies the traditions of fantasy writing so mercilessly (as in her wonderful books *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* and *Dark Lord of Derkheim*) while raking them very seriously. One of those traditions is "If it's a fantasy, there's more than one book," and so it is here. *The Merlin Conspiracy* is the second of a series—but so far, it's a very loosey-goosey sort of series. Before reading it, I recommend reading *Deep Secret* (Tor, 1997), which will explain a few things about the system of parallel worlds we're dealing with—without giving the reader much of an idea at all of what's going to happen. *Deep Secret*, simultaneously satirical and serious in nature, includes a dead-on depiction of an *s/f*

convention, into which a real centaur gallops to cries of "Great costume!" There's also a helpful ghost who's confined to the care of one of the protagonists, so he plays the car stereo constantly, scaring parking-structure passersby out of their wits.

Deep Secret takes place in a multiverse governed by hot-shot wizards known as Magids, who hop around from world to world putting out magical fires that could endanger the continued existence of all the worlds. In *Deep Secret*, we meet Nick Mallory, supposedly the adoptive son of a hack horror novelist in our world, but actually an heir to the throne of the Korymbic Empire in another world.

The Merlin Conspiracy takes place in an alternate Britain named Blest (as in Isles of the), in which there is still a medieval-style monarchy and magic takes the place of technology. The King moves constantly in a Progress from place to place, followed by a media bus which broadcasts his travels to the public of Blest. Roddy (short for Anarhod) is a teen daughter of one of the King's weather wizards. She watches out for her best friend Grundo, who is teased unstintingly by his sister and mother because he is dyslexic (a bad thing for a magic user to be, certainly). All of the magic of Blest is managed by the King's Merlin—in Blest, this is a title, not a name. When the old Merlin dies, the geeky new Merlin seems neither dangerous nor particularly competent—until Roddy and Grundo overhear a plot in which he and nefarious others will neutralize the King and all the other magic users and take over the government.

Roddy goes in search of help and runs into Nick, who is trapped between worlds and must promise to help three individuals to free himself. So he pledges to help Roddy, as well as Mini, the aforementioned elephant, and ends up helping Romanov, "the magical supremo," who lives on a very strange magical island—but one with lots of elephant food.

Thus it's up to Nick, Roddy, and Grundo to save the kingdom, alert the Magids to the danger that awaits, and learn about the complex family history that binds them all together. I will leave the mazes of the multiverse-spanning plot to the reader, as they're much more fun to experience than to read about. *The Merlin Conspiracy* is great entertainment—plus if you read it, you'll learn how to drive a car full of smoldering salamanders, why you should never refer to a dragon as a fossil, and the best way to deal with a goat that is eating your armchair. ▶

Walter Minkel lives in Forest Hills, New York.

From Santo to Sainthood

continued from page 1

"turn heel" or villains have a change of heart, there is no real subjectivity. You may be a fan of the bad guy, but that doesn't make him a hero.

Barthes argues that because wrestling is staged as an objective struggle between good and evil, it is able to give the audience the same sort of moral release once experienced by those watching Greek tragedy. He ends his essay,

In the ring, and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible. (25)

I have said that the fan's reaction to wrestling tends towards a willing suspension of disbelief; for the most part, his or her interest in the outcome evinces more a preoccupation, an interest, than an honest belief. But for a few individuals, the understanding that they are watching a moral struggle obscures the evident fakery of it. Nearly every account of wrestling includes some stories of overzealous fans, predominantly children and the elderly, who take the fight too seriously and try to participate. In Mexico, "children were . . . barred from attending the live event because they would try to approach their heroes during the match, and might be squashed" (Levi 339). Angela Carter in her article on wrestling, "Giants' Playtime," writes of the old women who "rush screaming down the aisles and beat their fists against the ropes" (228). Some of the incidents are more brutal than the matches themselves. In *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, Michael Ball quotes wrestler Maurice Vachon as saying, "A 75 year old [sic] man cut my brother's throat from ear to ear while he was leaving the ring. An old woman attacked me with an umbrella and cut my head open" (59-60). During a match in Boston, knif Blackjack Mulligan was attacked by an angry fan with a carpet knife, giving him a wound that took 187 stitches to close (Albano 229). Since the attacks usually stem from a need to participate in the moral drama, the good guys seldom fare badly.

No journalist or scholar has ever caught wrestling's dramatic character quite so well as novelist Stephen Dobyns. In his postmodern fantasy, *The Wrestler's Creed Study*, Dobyns uses mythology, fairytales, and humor to create a picture of the wrestler as an unwitting warrior for moral truth. His wrestlers act as the incarnations of gods and heroes; they include Killer Kalf, Isis the Insane, Loki, Coyote, and Cain. The protagonist is Michael Marmaduke, "ex-Parks and Rec employee and orphan boy from the Delaware Water Gap who considers East Stroudsburg, Pa., his home. [He] has a certain innocence, a certain naïveté. Others might find him shallow or dull" (171). Yet when Marmaduke wrestles, he is Marduk the Magnificent, the embodiment of the Babylonian god. His matches are fought against appropriate mythological figures such as Tiamat and Rahab the Arrogant One. The usual monologues and color commentary are elevated to the poetry of Middle Eastern epic. Thus, Marduk's entrance into the ring takes on the quality of a heroic invocation:

"Who comes forward?" cries Mr. Lightning. The white horse rears up and Marduk shakes the key to the abyss above his head. "It is I that comes forward! Marduk the Magnificent! I will rescue the people of the cities! I will restore the tablets of destiny!" Mr. Lightning stretches his arms toward Marduk. The crowd of twenty thousand are on their feet, shouting and whistling. Mr. Lightning permits himself a hopeful expression. "Can you draw out Levathan with a hook, / Press down his tongue with a cord? / Can you put a cord through his nose, / Can you pierce his jaw with a hook?" (52-53)

When his girlfriend Rose White is kidnapped, Michael falls in with a series of gangs who turn out to be the disciples of various religious-philosophical sects. In the process, he discovers that the board of the enigmatic Wrestling Association is made up of the Disputants, leaders of the same competing sects. Thus, the scripts that the wrestlers follow

are actually the physical translations of philosophical arguments between Manichaeans, Gnostics, Cathars, Valentinians, and so forth. Wrestling in Dobyns's world is not just a depiction of a moral struggle, it is morality personified.

As Michael continues his search for Rose White he must face (outside the ring) three opponents who, unlike him, have surrendered themselves to their character, or "gimmick," and lost their humanity. One such creature is Taurus:

It wasn't enough for Taurus to be an ugly oversized wrestler with a big salary, he wanted to be Taurus all the way through. He wanted to be Taurus on the inside as well as on the outside. So he checked into a special clinic and got himself a bull's jaw and a snout. Then he got a pair of horns. Then he had work done on his spine so he would be comfortable on all fours. Then he got himself a tail. Prime Rib realized something was wrong when Taurus stopped engaging in locker-room chitchat and would only snort and paw the floor with his feet. . . . And not long after that, Taurus gored Ormurd the Primal Man, and his wrestling career was over. (247).

Eventually, Michael also becomes subsumed by his gimmick.

These themes of transformation and "gimmick" are integral to the sport of Mexican wrestling, or *lucha libre*. As in the United States, *luchadores*, as wrestlers are called in Mexico, follow scripts with clearly defined outcomes. They too are split into colorful heroes (*técnicos*) and villains (*rudos*). But here a step further is taken towards the saturation of character. In the *lucha libre* tradition, the majority of the competitors wear masks at all times—even when pursuing everyday activities outside the ring. Rafael Olivera Figueroa, who acted as a *lucha libre* promoter and ringside doctor as well as writing a regular column on the subject, alleges that the iconic wrestler El Santo ("The Saint") even wore his mask while bathing.

Given such a tradition, it is easy to see how the *luchador* has become closely aligned with the comic book superhero. Indeed, they seem to have nearly the same birthday. Just a few months before Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, a promoter named Salvador Lutteroth, who had seen several wrestling matches in Texas, convinced a couple of American wrestlers to cross the border with him. Unlike American wrestling, which developed gradually over time, the birth of *lucha libre* is dated to September 21, 1933, the day that Lutteroth staged the first of his matches.

Luchadores and their promoters quickly began to take advantage of the comic book for inspiration. An awareness and appreciation of superheroes can be seen in the names of *luchadores* like Black Shadow, Blue Demon, the Gray Shadow, Fantasma Dorado (Golden Phantom), and even Superzan, a sort of amalgamation between Superman and Tarzan. Multiple sources report that El Santo himself based his character to some degree on Lee Falk's comic strip character The Phantom (Carr 27).

But it is of course the mask that truly links the *luchador* and the superhero. In "Masked Media: The Adventures of Lucha Libre on the Small Screen," Heather Levi writes:

the first mask used in Mexico was designed by Antonio H. Martínez, a shoemaker and wrestling fan, at the request of a North American wrestler, Cyclone Mackay. He asked Martínez to design a mask that would be "like a hood, for the Ku Klux Klan," so that he could tour as the Masked Marvel [La Maravilla Enmascarada]. (365)

Although the Masked Marvel had been used as a schtick by several North American wrestlers as early as 1915, only in Mexico did it really catch on (366). The first Mexican masked wrestler was El Murielazo (The Bat) Velásquez, known as "The Father of the Masked Wrestler" (Olivera Figueroa 45). Beginning in the 1930s, Velásquez wore a black mask and cape and was known not only for his costume and wrestling ability but for releasing bats, scorpions, fire ants, and even snakes from underneath his cape (49). (Decades later another skilled wrestler, Kahos, followed in the footsteps of El Murielazo. Kahos kept a trained dove under his cape which, when released, would attack his opponents [196].) By the 1950s, Levi reports, "the wrestling mask became a common feature of costuming . . . eventually coming to

symbolize the sport itself" (333-334). At the same time that audiences around the world were becoming interested in the superhero, Mexican wrestlers were acting as their living embodiments.

The mask, in lucha libre as in comic books, performs a number of functions. On the most basic level, it protects its wearer's identity by establishing a new, flashier identity. Supermen may continue his daily business as a reporter unless an emergency arises; similarly, a wrestler may raise his children, take a day job, and go out in public without having to put up with the downside of celebrity. (He may also make twice his salary by wrestling twice a night—once masked, once not.) Still, the mask also marks the wearer's new identity as an exceptional one and often gives some hint as to the nature of the exceptionality. (E.g., both Batman's mask and that of Murciélago Velásquez use their masks to link themselves to some of the nocturnal and occult connotations of the bat.) In the same way, the practitioners of many religions have used masks in their sacred functions. In *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts*, Walter Sorrell writes of the priest:

who would step in front of the god's altar hiding his face behind a mask. The mask may have served to create more readily the mysterious tie between the priest and the divine spirit, but primarily it was supposed to shed his humanness, with all its corporeal attributes. In those early days the mask played its part in what can be considered the spiritual act of becoming possessed in order to take possession. (11)

There is still a major difference between the possessed priest and the actual god, however, which the presence of the mask makes clear. If a being were really as exceptional as the mask indicated, he or she would have no need to wear a mask. The only masks worn by gods and monsters, after all, are human ones. Still, many luchadores claim that the mask does lend them a degree of transcendence. For *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, author Sharon Mazer spent many hours speaking to the wrestlers training at a gym in New Jersey, among them a pair of luchadores. She writes:

[Frankie] refers to [his mask] as a source of power and . . . claims to be unable to wrestle effectively when not fully bemasked and costumed. . . . Frankie says that it's important to him that he is able to "do things—not just the moves" and that he feels he can act more forcefully as a wrestler and a man when wearing his mask than when he is without it. (68)

Olivera Figueroa, a strong believer in the power of both the mask and the anecdote, tells of an experiment he and a friend carried out. Olivera Figueroa asserted that because of mysterious "vibrations," when a wrestler lost his mask, "his ability was lost to an alarming degree" (101). His friend, Héctor Valero Mére, denied "the magic of the vibrations" and said that a "good luchador would wrestle just as well with or without the mask." Accordingly, they asked a *réneado* and a *rudo* of equal weight and ability to switch masks and fight each other. Olivera Figueroa was delighted when the good guy fought like a heel, later saying that a "strange 'vibe' had overpowered him and made him do things that he never, in his career as a wrestler, had considered doing" (102). Of course this must be taken with more than one grain of salt, but it indicates some of the mystique that surrounds the spectacle of lucha libre.

In 1952, with the production of the first four movies in the enormously popular lucha libre subgenre, Mexican wrestling finally overcame the final barrier separating it from its comic book cousins. One of these films, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (*The Man with the Silver Mask*), marked the entry of the wrestler into fantasy cinema, and the creation of the luchador as our-and-out superhero. Not all of the 150+ lucha libre movies produced between 1952 and 1984 involved supernatural elements; comedies, melodramas, and action movies also made use of the wrestler. However, the fantasy/horror luchador movie was by far the most popular and most easily adapted to the wrestling format. 1956 saw the release of *Ladrón de Cadáveres* (*The Body Thief*), a film that Nelson Carro, in *El Cine de los Luchadores*, called "the most perfect symbiosis between the wrestling movie and the horror film" (29). It tells the tale of a mad scientist who, trying to find a way to prolong the human life span, replaces the brains of a group of wrestlers with those of animals. Of course, the plan goes

wrong, and a luchador with the brain of a gorilla, incongruously named "The Vampire," goes on a killing spree (29). Many of the other luchador fantasy movies starred El Santo fighting on his own or with the help of other masked wrestlers against a wide variety of fantastic beings, including but not limited to vampires (both generic vampire women and Count Dracula himself), Martians, mummies, minions of Satan, and the Wolfman. Most of the time, El Santo defeats his opponents simply because of his extraordinary wrestling ability, although in some cases he seems to possess vaguely superhuman characteristics. For instance, in *El Santo vs. the Martian Invasion*, El Santo is the only human immune to the aliens' disintegration ray, perhaps because of his many physical qualities. El Santo's popularity among Mexican audiences is considerable; Levi reports that during the course of her research, although she met many people who had never attended a wrestling match, she "[has] yet to hear anyone from Mexico City claim that he or she has never seen 'El Santo movie'" (368).

El Santo's influence extended even outside the box office, effecting a strange blurring of life and art. According to Levi, in 1983, "A group of activists organizing tenants in a building behind Arena Coliseo hit on the idea of having one of their members dress as El Santo to confront the landlord when he came to evict tenant families" (346). This event ushered in the singular era of the so-called "social wrestler." These individuals were men and women who donned the uniform of the masked wrestler (and by extension, the superhero) to bring attention to political and social causes. The most famous social wrestler was "Superbarrio" Gómez, an actual retired wrestler who, after 13 years spent patrolling the streets of Mexico City in a fight against social injustice, hung up his cape in 2000. Superbarrio first appeared in 1987 at a march protesting the National Fund for Popular Housing, which had not fulfilled its promise to provide appropriate aid to those left homeless by the 1983 earthquake. The Neighborhood Assembly (Asamblea de Barrios), which organized the march, had little hope the protest would receive any media attention. As Paul Day colorfully wrote in *Business Mexico*:

The people needed a miracle; they needed someone, or something, to highlight their situation. Considering the current political climate, they were going to need some kind of superhero if they wished to rake on the untouchable politicians in their high-walled, well-guarded mansions and offices. What they got was a rather portly man dressed in a red and gold wrestler's outfit, sporting a Superman style "SB" in large gold letters across his chest. . . . Superbarrio stepped up to the microphone and announced he had arrived to fight the government and defend the rights of the poor and homeless. (8)

In the years that followed, Superbarrio fulfilled his mission statement in a variety of ways, mostly by speaking publicly and by

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staging mock battles against characters dressed as social evils. At the height of his popularity, he met with political figures like Jesse Jackson, Fidel Castro, and François Mitterrand. He spoke at the 1996 Habitat Conference and the World Environmental Summit in Rio de Janeiro (58). He also became such a thorn in the side of government officials that at one Chamber of Representatives meeting a sign outside the door read "No Masks." As undaunted as any superhero, Superbarrio had a number of women smuggle his costume into the building piece by piece so he could dress in the bathroom and have his say at the end of the meeting. Superbarrio also spawned a number of other social wrestling figures, including Superfútbol, Mujer Maravilla, Superanimal, and Supercolegista, who worked alone or with Superbarrio to bring attention to various causes.

With heroes like El Santo onscreen and Superbarrio off, it is perhaps not very surprising that the luchadore has made his way into the Mexican brand of magical realism in the last two decades. In three works by Mexican-Americans, we find wrestlers fighting evil, or at least rubbing elbows with saints and other fantastic characters.

In María Amparo Escandón's novel, *Santitas* (its English title is *Esperanza's Box of Saints*), when Esperanza loses her daughter Blanca to a mysterious disease, San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of lost causes, appears to her in her own window and tells her that Blanca is not really dead. Esperanza becomes convinced that her daughter has been abducted and forced into prostitution, so she follows a trail from Sotomayor, Mexico, to Los Angeles, working as a prostitute herself in the hope of picking up clues. On her trip, she encounters a picture of a wrestler named "El Angel Justiciero," or the angel of justice, "a huge, masked wrestler dressed as an angel, with a very impressive cape resembling feathered wings" (89). When El Angel Justiciero appears on television, Esperanza reacts to him the same way she reacts to her holy visions. Escandón writes:

Then, without warning, like an earthquake, surrounded by vaporous clouds and golden rays, a glowing figure, an angel, appeared before Esperanza, opening his feathered wings across the whole TV screen, as if he were trapped inside a crystal box. He was dressed in white, a belt with a huge gold medallion around his waist. She could see his strong body suspended in the air, descending slowly. His face was hidden behind a white mask with a glittering golden strip outlining his eyes and mouth. . . . She couldn't help but touch the screen with the tips of her fingers and make the sign of the cross. She made the same gesture on her saints' glass cases back home. And she did it with San Judas Tadeo on her own window. Now she was performing the ritual on a TV set. (170-171)

When Esperanza finally meets El Angel Justiciero (coincidentally when he is wrestling a villain dressed as an immigration agent), she falls in love. Although the wrestler turns out not to have magical qualities, it is he who leads her to the church where her saint finally tells her Blanca is (227). It seems likely that the Spanish title, *Santitas*, the term

for the small carved wooden saints to which Esperanza appeals, is a deliberate allusion to El Santo, who bears a clear resemblance to El Angel Justiciero.

Atómico Blue, Mexican Wrestler, an independent film directed by Richard Salazar, coopts the myth of the luchador to tell the familiar story of the reluctant hero who must face his failings to save the day. When a corrupt real estate developer plots to build a freeway over a Hispanic section of East Los Angeles, Nick, a twelve-year old whose family is to be evicted, appeals to his hero, Atomic Blue, a down-and-out wrestler. Like El Santo, Atomic Blue once fought evil in films and in the ring, but he believes that his glory days have passed. Of course, Atomic Blue reluctantly agrees to help, but he backs out when a price is put on his head. Only Nick's kidnapping at the hands of the developers gives him the courage he needs to face and defeat the enemy. While the plot holds few surprises, this actually works to the movie's advantage since it mirrors the narrative formula of the typical wrestling match.

Ironically, the fantastic narratives that have probably introduced the most Americans to lucha libre, Jaime Hernández's contributions to the *Love and Rockets* comic books, are also those which treat the subject the most realistically. While the luchadoras (for Hernández's lucha libre sections predominantly feature women wrestlers like Vicky Glori and Rena Tiraheón) inhabit a world populated by spaceships, aliens, and millionaire playboys with horns, they do not embark on any fantastic adventures themselves.

Thus far, the wrestler in life and fiction has followed a circular progression. First comes the wrestler as ordinary man, best exemplified by those who participate in amateur wrestling, which is no different from other sports. With the addition of masks and different personae comes the wrestler as exceptional man. He is one of the antagonists in a staged morality play. His "powers" may be nothing more than his skill at wrestling, but he may also actively possess animal training capabilities, a mysterious past, or mind control. Still, he is ultimately a character who exists in our own world and competes as an entertainer. Third comes the superhuman wrestler exemplified by El Santo, Blue Demon, and the other protagonists of lucha libre fantasy movies. Finally, closing the circle, is the wrestler as superhuman manqué. Like Atomic Blue and El Angel Justiciero, he is appealed to by those who believe him to be a superhuman wrestler but ultimately prove himself, for better or for worse, to be nothing more than human.

That the wrestler has borrowed from the epic, the poetic, and the fantastic to heighten the spectacle of his or her sport should be no surprise. At its best, wrestling reminds us that the fantastic, or at least something that resembles it, takes place in our own world. For no more than the price of a ticket, we can be in the same room as superheroes and watch them do their work without the intermediaries of the page, the camera, or the television screen. ▀

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Jenny Blackford
Reading Gene Wolfe's *Return to the Whorl*

Doctorates about Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Short Sun* series are doubtless in progress, especially after its third and apparently final volume, *Return to the Whorl*, was released in 2001. *Return to the Whorl* is not a novel in its own right, but rather the culmination of three sequential books of books.

The three volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun* were preceded by the four volumes of *The Book of the New Sun*, the first of which was published in 1981, and its 1987 sequel *The Urth of the New Sun*; and by the four volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun*, the first of which was published in 1993. They are all beautifully written, rich and complex almost to a fault. The 12 books effectively constitute a single, very long novel, or, perhaps, if we take the three series titles *The Book of . . .* seriously, a really long trilogy. Of course, it is possible that there is another related series on the way; *Return to the Whorl* may not be the last of this sequence.

I would strongly advise anyone against buying or borrowing *Return to the Whorl* and reading it straight away, in isolation. You should at least first read, or if possible reread, the whole of *The Book of the Long Sun*, then the preceding two volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun*, i.e. *On Blue's Waters* and *In Green's Jungles*. Even though *The Book of the New Sun* (including the fifth book, *Urth of the New Sun*) is set in a different world from *The Book of the Long Sun* and *The Book of the Short Sun*, with (mostly) different characters, and with no connection between them immediately apparent, they are in fact connected at a deep level. Therefore, you will be vastly better off if, before rereading *The Book of the Long Sun* and *The Book of the Short Sun*, you first reread *The Book of the New Sun*.

Return to the Whorl is not an easy read—rather less so than any of the preceding volumes. Do not pick this one up in an idle moment. You need an idle day (or a month, if possible, for the homework) and a clear head. After I finished rereading the three series, culminating in reading *Return to the Whorl* twice, much of the complex setup had gradually fallen into place in my head, but I was still baffled about many things. Did the shapeshifting, vampirelike inhuman, for example, really fly through hard vacuum between the planets Blue and Green? Could the secret of the inhuman really be as trivial as it seemed? What did Horn do to Chenille on Green? How did the astral travel stuff in the last two books really work?

I did what one does these days: I searched the net. There is an online community of terrifyingly intelligent and literate people who discuss Wolfe with obsessive tenacity. The archives of the list are at <www.urth.net/urth/archives>, and are searchable. To my profound relief, the archives showed a general experience not wholly dissimilar to mine. On my questions above, for example, some thought one thing, some thought another, and others were violently undecided.

How can I summarize what happened in the first eleven books of this long and complex work? Wolfe's familiar preoccupations—with self, spirit, and personhood, with truth, lies, and self-deception; with death, life, and resurrection—permeate the books. Unreliable narrators tell us long tales, during which they encounter the dead and, often, die themselves; identity is lost, merged, or changed; shapeshifters imitate and prey on human beings; and the apparent writer within the stories (Wolfe, of course, is the "real" writer) is often revealed as a mere mouthpiece for others.

The four novels of *The Book of the New Sun* are probably the best known of the books. They tell the story of the torturer Severian on some very peculiar travels on a dying Urth, in a universe full of technology so old and so strange that the books feel like fantasy, not sf. Severian meets strange people (huge sea-dwelling alien women, a monstrous giant and the doctor he has created to serve him, man-specs who live in a mine, the evil tyrant Typhon, the green man from the far future, time-traveling aliens sent to guide Urthlings), and has many long conversations with them—long conversations are a feature of all of these books—and rather more sexual encounters than one might have expected. Like so many Wolfe heroes, Severian is apparently irresistible.

Severian moves rapidly from being a penniless apprentice torturer to supreme power on Urth as its Autarch. Gradually, he comes to

understand that his life task is to try to save the cooling Urth by bringing the New Sun, that is, bringing a White Fountain to renew the dying Sun, which is being eaten up by a Black Pit. To get the White Fountain and bring the New Sun, he has to travel to the higher universe, Yesod, and plead with an entity closer to God ("the Incarnate") than the people of Urth. In doing so, Severian miraculously becomes the Conciliator of centuries earlier, whose sacred memory he once revered.

One huge advantage of rereading all these books in one fell swoop is that many of Wolfe's little puzzles become satisfyingly clear. What was murky when read year by year as they came out is relatively simple when one can read them all together. The answers to questions like the identity of Severian's mother, father, and grandparents are relatively easy. (The question of Severian's sister, however, remains murkier.)

After *The Book of the New Sun* comes the superficially unrelated *The Book of the Long Sun*. The eponymous Long Sun is the heating and illuminating structure in the center of the *Whorl*, which is a generation starship made from a hollowed-out asteroid. The *Whorl* is ruled by "gods," personalities uploaded long ago into the mainframe which runs the *Whorl*. Pas, the chief god of the *Whorl*, is a computer upload of the thoroughly unpleasant tyrant Typhon, who lived on Urth long before Severian's birth. Severian meets Typhon twice: he briefly brings the long-desecrated Typhon back to life during his journey north in *The Sword of the Lictor*; and when Severian travels back in time to become the Conciliator in *Urth of the New Sun*, he is persecuted at Typhon's hands, escaping by a (quite literal) miracle. Sadly, while Typhon's spirit, the god Pas, appears throughout *The Book of the Long Sun*, we do not reconquer Severian until *Return to the Whorl*.

The basis of the Long Sun books is that Typhon created the *Whorl* around the time when Severian met him in Typhon's first lifetime. He loaded it with a Cargo of live human people ("bios"), preserved people ("sleepers"—press-ganged into the *Whorl*, to judge by the conversations of woken sleepers), androids ("chems"), and embryos (human and animal), plus seeds, all to stock the future colony. Typhon had his personality, and those of his family and friends, uploaded into Mainframe on the *Whorl*, where they gave themselves divine attributes and Greek-inspired names. Pas, for example, is Greek for "All." In the Long Sun series, the "gods" communicate with the people of the *Whorl* through the Sacred Windows (big video monitors) and can possess people by downloading part of their "divine" personalities into their worshippers through the Windows, or, indeed, any monitor. They are all as bloodthirsty as Pas was when he was alive, wanting frequent sacrifice, preferably human. Each city-state of the *Whorl* has its patron deity.

By the time of the action of *The Book of the Long Sun*, hundreds of years after the *Whorl* left Urth, human members of the Cargo living and breeding in the *Whorl* have lost most of their memories of Urth. They are unaware of their Cargo status, and take the *Whorl* for granted as the world. The *Whorl* arrived long ago at a star system with two apparently suitable planets, Blue and Green, but none of the Cargo knows that there is anything outside the ship, and the few Crew have little power and cannot even try to get them outside. Pas wants the Cargo to leave the *Whorl* for Green or Blue, but his family has rebelled against him, and "killed" him in Mainframe. (Incidentally, Pas in these books seems less evil than the "real" Typhon was. Like so many Wolfe characters, Pas is, in a sense, dead, and some of his less pleasant personality components seem, fortunately, to have been lost in the process.)

The main character of the Long Sun books is Patra (i.e., Father) Silk, a priest whose goodness and humility is as charming in its way as Severian's ample acceptance of life as a torturer. He is "illuminated" by the Outsider—a god who exists outside the *Whorl*, not one of Pas's family and friends (yes, he seems to be the Judeo-Christian God-of-Pas's family and friends). Silk has traditionally Wolfean long conversations with many very strange people as he battles criminals and the corrupt government of his native city-state Viron in various complicated sub-plots. One of the most typically Wolfean of these subplots is that in which the leader of Silk's order of augurs, Patra Quetzal, is gradually revealed to be an alien blood-sucking shapeshifter. Interestingly, Quetzal is a thoroughly engaging character and by no means a total villain.

Silk's conscience is profoundly troubled by his unexpected, forbidden, passionate love for a very beautiful prostitute, Hyacinth, who is often possessed by the goddess of love, Kypris. (Wolfe's heroes are remarkably willing to love—not just make love to—women of much lower intellectual and moral status, if they are beautiful, and particularly if they are voluptuous.)

Finally, Silk struggles with the rundown systems of the *Whorl*, trying to get the people of Viron safely transported to the nearby planets Green or Blue. One major problem is that the Cargo have cannibalized the ship, including its landers, during the long journey, confiscating the computers' memory cards, which they use as money. As a result, few of the landers are operational.

The Book of the Long Sun is strongly centered on Silk and, although written in the third person, appears to be authored by Silk himself. One of the minor characters in *The Book of the Long Sun* is Silk's pupil Horn, who is chastised at one point for his excellent imitations of Silk. Horn admits at the end of *The Book of the Long Sun* that he and his wife Nettle, rather than Silk, wrote the whole account.

In turn, Horn appears to be the writer of *The Book of the Short Sun*, but appearances are often deceptive. At the beginning of the action of *The Book of the Short Sun*, in *On Blue's Waters*, Horn and Nettle are living on the planet Blue, recently colonized by the people sent from the *Whorl* by Silk. Their house is on a small island, the Lizard, near New Viron, a settlement founded by the people of Viron. With their oldest son Sinev and their twins Hoof and Hide (the naming conventions of Viron are stern), the couple run a paper mill.

The frontier civilization of Blue is becoming increasingly uncontrolled and violent as economic disparity between the colonists increases—for example, slavery is arising. The problems on Blue are compounded by the inhuman, a race of shapeshifting alien bloodsuckers native to Green, of whom Patena Quetzal in the *Whorl* was one. They are reminiscent of, but generally agreed to be different from, the shapeshifting alien blood-suckers of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Blood confers something close to identity: the inhuman drink human blood because they want to be human.

A delegation from New Viron asks Horn to go back to the *Whorl* to find Silk and bring him to Blue to restore order. However, apart from any difficulties in finding Silk and persuading him to travel to Blue, even the task of getting back up to the *Whorl* is difficult. Any landers sent from the *Whorl* automatically return to it unless they are hopelessly damaged, but it is claimed that there is a lander in the mysterious town of Pajarocu, which is rumored to be on a continent far from New Viron.

In the first Short Sun book, *On Blue's Waters*, the narrator, who calls himself Horn, writes of his strange adventures in his journey, mostly by sea, to Pajarocu. These adventures conspicuously include Horn's infatuation with a beautiful, one-armed siren, Seawrack, who joins him in his boat; his (probable) death in a concealed pit on an island on the way; and subsequent (probable) resurrection; and his developing relationships with Krait, an inhuman who claims to be his son, and with the former inhabitants of Blue, the Vanished People or Neighbors, who have many arms and legs and are strangely and suspiciously difficult to see. Are they really "there"?

In Pajarocu, Horn boards a decrepit lander run by inhuman and men who turn out to be his slaves. It is obvious to Horn that the inhuman plan to take the lander not to the *Whorl*, but to their native Green, where slavery and death await the humans on board, but he cannot persuade his fellows, so disaster ensues.

The narrator, who claims to be Horn, intersperses the first-person account of Horn's travels from his home on the Lizard to the lander in Pajarocu, with another first-person account of the narrator's "present" situation as Rajan of an Indian-like state, which is at war with a Chinese-like state. It is clear that everyone around the narrator in "present" time believes that he is Silk, not Horn, though he denies it persistently.

In *Green's Jungles* has rather less of the jungle than *On Blue's Waters* has of the sea. The dual narrative continues: on Blue, the narrator in "present" time tells the reader about a power struggle between small Italianate city-states in which he becomes involved; the story of Horn's time on Green is interspersed through the "present" narrative in small chunks, in reported conversation and reported storytelling. In this book, the narrator in "present" time tells the reader

about a phenomenon like astral travel which starts to happen to him and those around him. Their bodies remain where they are on Blue, apparently asleep, but their spirits find themselves in other places (on Green, mostly, but also on Severian's Urth). This is frequently critical to the plot.

In part of the action reported in *In Green's Jungles*, Horn certainly dies, killed in a battle with the inhuman on Green, and his "spirit" is transferred by the Neighbors to a body whose "spirit is dying." It seems obvious to the reader that the new body is Silk's, and that Silk's spirit is dying because his beloved Hyacinth is dead. The narrator does not wish to acknowledge this. The reader cannot, of course, be sure of anything, because this is Gene Wolfe.

At the beginning of *Return to the Whorl*, in the "present" time, the narrator is returning home to New Viron and Nettle, accompanied by his son Hide, and later by Hide's twin, Hoof. The "present" narrative is written in the first person, as were the whole of the previous two books.

The account of past events in *Return to the Whorl*—mostly the narrator's travels in the *Whorl*, looking for Silk—is written in the third person, interspersed chapter by chapter with "present" events. The central character is referred to as "he." (The shift to third person for this narrative is significant; the explanation comes late in the book.) This third-person text starts with the narrator's finding himself on the *Whorl*, bleeding, next to the corpse of a middle-aged woman who is presumed by all but the narrator to be Silk's wife, Hyacinth. He travels to and through Viron, often literally as well as figuratively in the dark, dealing and conversing with the usual very strange people, who clearly believe him to be Silk.

The narrator maintains to them all, against all probability, that he is in fact Horn (and he does have Horn's memories, though Silk's memories also intrude). The narrator acknowledges that he looks different now; he is taller, his full head of hair is white, and he has a long white beard. However, he refuses to deal with the fact that his body is obviously Silk's, and that he has changed very considerably in many ways from Horn the short, bald paper mill owner.

The astral travel in *Return to the Whorl* includes several visits to the young apprentice torturer Severian in the Matachin Tower. Severian as an earnest child is terribly appealing. The narrator is even introduced to Severian's dog Triskele. These are the closest things to a romp in the book.

Horn, sadly, is not as likable a character as either the peculiarly gentle torturer Severian or the virtuous, guilt-ravaged Silk. He is much more of a rough diamond. For example, he hates his son, Sinev, passionately, carefully misinterpreting (the doubtless surly) Sinev's affectionate acts; and he rapes the young siren Seawrack whom the giant aquatic goddess Mother "gives" him.

This description has merely scratched the surface of a hugely complex work. I have avoided, for example, any but a brief mention of gods possessing mortals in the Short Sun books, downloading their personalities into them, but the *Whorl* list mentioned above is full of speculation as to how far Silk was merged into Pas on the *Whorl*, in a complex download/upload scenario, and therefore how much of Pas is in the narrator. Puzzles as complicated as this abound.

As the series progresses, Wolfe writes more and more through indirection. Conversations and stories increasingly make up the bulk of the text. In *Return to the Whorl*, the narrator teases the reader with promises to relate important events, which he never actually gets around to. The reader is forced, even more than in most Wolfe books, to piece together much of the actual story from hints. While this is interesting, it may be less pleasurable as a reading experience than more traditional narrative.

Do not expect a dazzling sense of satisfying closure at the end of *Return to the Whorl*, or even as much closure as there was at the end of the previous two series. The book may well leave the reader more puzzled than sated, and the ending came as at least an initial disappointment, not only to me, but to some on the *Whorl* list. Few loose ends were explicitly tied up or conflicts resolved. Most people posting on the list report that they found that it helped them to think about the book and to reread it; I certainly found the ending more satisfying on my second reading.

Religious symbolism and references contribute much of the intense textual richness of the New, Long, and Short Sun books.

However, this richness can sometimes verge on discomfort. Less religious readers may have felt a little squeamish while reading *Urbis of the New Sun*, as Severian became a full-blown Christ figure (though he is, thankfully, an *advoc* of Christ, not an allegory). The Long Sun and Short Sun series take this further. Like the priest Silk in *The Book of the Long Sun*, the narrator of *The Book of the Short Sun*, who denies that he is Silk, feels the presence of the Outsider (i.e., God). In *Return to the Whorl*, the narrator actually celebrates mass-like “sacrifice” with bread and wine. On one of these occasions, he even says “This is my body” of the bread, and “This is my blood” of the wine.

The religious solemnity of this masslike occasion is a little

undercut; the narrator takes auguries from the breadcrumbs and spilled wine; his communicant is not a “real” human being but an incompletely-built “chem,” or android; and the literal body and blood that the narrator is referring to as “my body” and “my blood” are those of Horn, dead for some days on Green; but all the same. . . .

This is not a short read, or an easy one. It is, however, profoundly interesting. ►

Jenny Blackford lives in Melbourne, Australia. This article appeared in a slightly different form in SF Commentary 78, February 2003, edited by Bruce Gillespie.

Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom by Cory Doctorow

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$22.95 hc; 208 pages

Free download: <www.craphound.com/down/download.php>

reviewed by Damien Broderick

Call it “blogpunk.”

I know, I winced too, but it seems terrifyingly apt. Worse, we might regard the characters in this 47,350-word novella as “blogketeers,” halfway between rocketeers and Mouseketeers, maturity-arrested castmembers in a future Disney World retirement village neurotopia. Money and paid work are gone by 2130 or thereabouts, replaced by what the book engagingly dubs “Whuffie” (pronounced woo-fee, not wuh-fee), instantly updated tallies of peer esteem, reputation, online bloggy buzz. Whuffie registers how much you’re being the opposite of dissed, and Doctorow builds the distribution arm of his nanofactory economy on it. The world, the solar system, is itself the magic kingdom, fueled and fed and entertained for free by self-replicating molecular machines running Napsterishly downloadable programs. The Whuffie-busted are down and out but not dead, or, if dead, at least revivable; you can queue at any of the makers around town and eat or drink without charge. “The number of low-esteem individuals at large was significant, and they got along just fine, hanging out in parks, arguing, reading, staging plays, playing music.”

The disgruntled kids aren’t writing viruses or worms any more; they’re competing for pocklatch and what fans traditionally dub “cogoboo” but more negotiable, earning the respect of their Bitchun Society peers (*tout le monde*, effectively, for the past century) and making a good living at it while doing their fourth doctorate, Bitchun Society. Really. That’s what these wannabe hip, cool, disastrously nerdy nitwit ancients call their culture. If his had been hippiepunk, 30, 35 years back, they’d call it the Spliff, or Loveworld, or the Wow Man Society. Same as, really.

So Doctorow is having us on, right? Well, it’s hard to say. This little book enacts itself. It’s building up humongous gusts of Whuffie for blogmeister Cory, a hyperenergetic web presence at <beingboing.net>. Before the print book was released, it was fescueed with encomiums from the great and near-great of the wired and retired worlds. Mitch Kapor figured it “captures and defines the spirit of a turning point in human history.” Rudy Rucker, who’s been writing versions of this future forever, asserts that Doctorow “starts out at the point where older sf writers’ speculations end.” Bruce Sterling sparkled, fizzed, and backflipped in his enthusiasm. Cory’s blog quotes Paul Di Filippo claiming that “*Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* is some kind of translucent supergoat whose milk is full of spidersilk proteins and nanocentrals.” *The New York Times* liked it. I was eager to read on, because you could feel that righteous Whuffie gusting and swirling up a storm.

And that was the thing of it. It wasn’t the book’s merits as fiction or as futurism or as satire; it had become, in a clever marketing move, a Whuffie magnet. They were giving it away free! You could download the text in a dozen convenient and various formats: PDF, for printing to look like a book, or HTML for the

screen, or .txt for ease, or your choice of handheld. Then, if you liked it and couldn’t be without your own hardcopy, you could dial up Amazon.com or trot to the bookstore and buy the hardcover from Tor. Whuffie! Cory Doctorow’s meter was spinning, lights were flashing, the machine was binging and dinging, it was awesome: *twenty thousand free downloads in the first two days!* This was blogpower. This was blogpunk, working the global room, sparkling, fizzing, and backflipping, anything but down and out.

But in the novel, poor Julius the narrator, dismal prat that he is, has to fall. It’s a narrative arc, d00d. It’s a fortunate fall, Felix. First they kill him, then he bounces back, because we’re dealing here with early postmortal posthumanity. Then they give him enough rope, and he strangles himself, and he doesn’t even get off on it. But it all turns out okay in the end, except, of course, that in an early posthuman novel the end never comes, except that when it does, when the heat death of the universe rolls along in 10¹⁰⁰ years, someone is gonna be deadheading in hibernation toward it (we learn on the opening page), waking just often enough to take its temperature and roll on toward the End.

Now that last item’s enough to throw a reader in 2003 up and out of the book. Is there gonna be a heat death of the universe? Didn’t they just show that the cosmological constant is pushing everything apart faster and faster, so that the light cone, the boundary of Everything, will cut the cosmos into dreadful detached chunks long before that old, close of the nineteenth-century doom comes upon us?

It’s difficult keeping up, even when you’re doing blogpunk in a post-Singularity twenty-second century. Yet Paul Di Filippo thinks that’s the setting:

What we have here is a rare example of post-Singularity fiction. The Singularity, or Spike, is deemed to be that moment at which mankind emerges into transhuman existence, with or without the help or hindrance of strong AI. (Doctorow eschews the AI, for the most part.)

But you *can’t* eschew artificial intelligence and still have a Singularity, not really, not as late as the middle of the twenty-second century. Not without a mighty good argument you can’t, and there’s no trace of an argument in this book, just *parti pris*. I am assuming that the mise-en-scène is edge of Singularity, since mind back-up and other effortless advanced tech here deployed requires the vast computational grunt that would zoom you to Singularity.

Arguably that’s a point in its favor, since a healthy lived-in future just plunks us down (punks us down) in the magic kingdom and lets the crafty ride take us into its invented reality on the wings of discourse and the pre-established iconography of the megatext. But Doctorow does not eschew clunky datardums. Julius, his narrator, is endlessly chewing over the facts of the world with his old buddy Keep A-movin’ Dan, who argues happily with a man

who's died and been recompiled more than once that

"...you're not really an atom-for-atom copy. You're a clone, with a copied brain—that's not the same thing as quantum destruction."

"Very nice thing to say to someone who's just been murdered, pal. You got a problem with clones?"

And we were off and running. (42)

I don't think so, d00d. Not after a century and more of this stuff being as utterly ordinary as opening the car door and slipping behind the wheel. So this isn't a datadump, it couldn't be. Julius explains it away for us:

I knew what he was doing, distracting me with one of our old fights, but I couldn't resist the bait, and as I marshaled my arguments, it actually helped calm me down some. (41)

Still not convinced, sorry. Doctorow is far more effective when he just drops the floating signifiers into the story, as one does these days (since about 1953): Free Energy, ad-hocracy, HUDs (wait—they still use CAPS to indicate heads-up displays?), Whuffie itself. Sexy gals lollop in with double knee joints and fur, all the rage among the kids. People cavort in sexy muscular orbital bubbles, naked and disinhibited; it's the kind of thing Spider Robinson could never have invented 20 years ago. Oh wait, Spider *did* invent it 20 years ago. And those Disney World riffs, and downloads into clones after you've been killed, and web connects inside your head—wouldn't John Varley have bitten his lip to think that if only he'd tried harder he could have told these stories 25 years ago. Oh wait—

Now it would be unkind to complain that Cory Doctorow had reinvented all these wheels, instead of recombining them with a certain blogpunk zest, if it weren't for all the retired and wired great and good shouting so loudly that he's the next *New Thing*, gather 'round and marvel! No, in fact his sometime-collaborator Charlie Stross is the Next Big Thing, or at any rate the Now Big Thing. Charlie writes like a bastard, rips off your limbs and then tears off your head. Still, loads of Whuffie are being shoveled to the man with the bright, the inevitable, idea of blogpunking his little book through the pores of the net. Is Whuffie a non-zero-sum commodity? Hard to be sure just yet. As an act of old-time Canadian Marshall McLuhan medium messaging, Doctorow's gambit is welcome and interesting to watch.

But what about as a *novel*?

What about as a now-moment science fiction novel?

Sorry, my dears, it doesn't really cut the mustard. The whole is less than the sum of several intriguing parts that Doctorow and others will surely develop more interestingly in other fiction and nonfiction. My own reaction, as a sample and nonrepresentative non-American reader, is skewed by not having much of an advance clue about the Magic Kingdom, zero throat-catching, eye-watering nostalgia. I've heard of Florida's Walt Disney World, and that's it.

Doctorow doesn't bother describing his setting, not in detail, because (I guess) he assumes it's universally known and loved. Maybe 99.2% of U.S. readers will thrill to the familiar invocation of those lovable settings, the Haunted Mansion and Liberty Square and the Hall of Presidents and the House of Something or other, with their ancient animatronic dignitaries and spooky ghosts and child-thrilling rides, but it's all empty signifiers to me, d00d—you're really got to pump some more elbow-grease into the keyboard. (For the locals, perhaps this admission is almost incomprehensibly dull and dumb of me.) But the trouble doesn't stop with the locale hand-waving.

The story is simplicity itself. Julius and his local affinity group are heroically devoted to one part of Disney World, and beaver away to keep its ancient legacy equipment and rides gleaming. Visitors pay in dollops of esteem, but only as long as they keep coming through the turnstiles. Meanwhile, Debra and her competing ad-hocs run another concession, but they're not content with maintenance and micro-tweaking; these shocking

radicals with no respect for the eternal verities want to "tear down every marvelous rube goldberg in the Park and replace them with pristine white sim boxes on giant, articulated servos." When Julius is shot to death mysteriously and reborned, he's livid, certain, but without proof, that this was Debra's work (like children, they have only first names), meant to bollix his own team and pave the way for its ouster. He fights back with a stunning new idea: offsite visitors could port into robot bodies and become part of the show! Nobody has ever thought of such a daring scheme during the past century or so, but it's doomed unless the vile plans of the sim box clique are defeated, and meanwhile they're fighting dirty, maneuvering poor Julius permanently offline and outta touch with the happening world. Meanwhile, Dan and Lil betray him sexually and in other ways. The jig's up for the Haunted Mansion. Or so it seems. But Jules pulls his chestnuts out of the fire in the nick of time and goes on his way in the chastened expectation of plentiful Whuffie once he gets his new symphony done.

So this is not one of those rousing pre-Golden Age space operas with a silver-clad hero saving the universe, let alone a Greg Egan novel where entire ontological realms are at stake. There's much to be said for such comic cosmic deflation. But—

None of the technology hangs together. These people can do perfect backups of their brains in a few minutes at the handy corner facility. They can flash-bake whole VR lives of the great and the dead into punters passing through hoopy rides, rich with sensory conviction and replete with historical information. They read each other's minds, in effect, with their embedded web systems, and google the world via their HUDs. Meanwhile, they enter data with ...

... keyboards, real or virtual, air-typing their code and reading the results on their HUDs. This is roughly the equivalent of a blogger entering the news of the day by chiseling it into rock.

I don't think that's just an accidental oversight, or a concession to the bloggers with their own keyboards and hell-lit laser mice; it cuts to the core of what's fuxored in this future. True, the corner of the future inhabited by Julius and his screwdriver-savvy girlfriend Lil, 15 percent of his 120 years old, and Debra, his vicious strategic antagonist, and old farts Tom and Rita, Lil's absconded deadheading parents, and all the Disney groupies, is a convenient narrative aperture for us early twenty-first century readers to watch through. Even bloggers need a helping hand with the *mise-en-scène*. But you get the feeling that the rest of this world, too, is trapped in some kind of endlessly recycled Ricky & Lucy dreaming. This is, ostensibly, the problem at the heart of evil Debra's plans to upgrade the sacred traditions of Walt's Kingdom, which makes her the secret hero by neophilic of convention. Well, except that most beloved sf is recuperative, whenever possible stabilizing and restoring the status quo. But this can't work, because there's easy offworld travel, "mortality rate at zero and the birthrate at nonzero," so that "the world was inexorably accreting a dense carpet of people, even with the migratory and deadhead drains on the populations" (8). Resistance is futile, because by the nature of the thing Luddites who resist die at the traditional age while the adopters blithely live on.

It's hard to believe that all the world's historical trajectories would lock down into Disneyland (I know they don't, but that's the metaphysic the book's myopic focus insinuates), even given the ceaseless plotting and seething of competing ad-hocs that provide the semblance of a plot. I wanted to see at least the rest of the novel, the next 47,350 words, once our guys were free of the compulsion to repeat. Maybe that will be Doctorow's next move. But then maybe that would itself be, fatally, to repeat. Sadly, today's sf mostly gets major Whuffie by repeating and very little for innovating. Call it Doctorow's crux. ▀

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The Apocalypse Door by James D. Macdonald

New York: Tor Books, 2002; \$22.95 hc; 224 pages

reviewed by Keith Mutzman

The Apocalypse Door is the amalgamation of a westernized Hong Kong action film and Jack Finney's classic thriller *Junction of the Body Snatchers*. Like the Killer character of Hong Kong action movies, Peter Crossman seeks to atone for a lifetime of murder and mayhem conducted for a nameless government agency; to do this, he joins The Order of the Knights of the Temple, warrior monks commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church to protect holy places, travelers to these sites, and certain relics.

James Macdonald opens his *Door* with Crossman and Simon Barnabas LaRoche, Crossman's new trainee for the ranks of the Order's Inner Temple ("thrice and thirty" covert operatives, each with special skills granted to them by "the World, the Flesh, and the Devil," whom the Church sends to do its dirty work) investigating a team of missing UN peacekeepers whose trail leads to a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey.

Unfortunately, the peacekeepers are nowhere to be found. Instead, Crossman and LaRoche uncover a large crate filled with supremely odd and pungent mushrooms. Pale and translucent, with a sickly white color, the mushrooms act like they are conscious, actually recoiling from a sword (or perhaps from the cross formed by the sword's blade, grip, and quillons) when LaRoche brings it into contact with the mushroom stalk for a sample.

With the help of Sister Mary Magdalene, an operative of the Special Action Executive Branch of the sisterhood of the Poor Clares, and armed with dubious information from Francis X. Dairymple, a defrocked Satanist (he was excommunicated for giving evil a bad name), Crossman and LaRoche track down the source of the mysterious fungi.

Following a trail of friends and informants who have been horribly mutilated—their faces torn off—the Knights find worse than even these hardened soldiers can imagine: the Teutonic Knights, a sect of the Knights Templar long since expelled from the Order for their radical dealings with such men as Adolf Hitler. And in their possession is the unholy of unholy: the bronze head of Baphomet.

The head of Baphomet is a legendary bronze casting, missing for over 600 years. It has the power to influence men's minds and actions and was the object of Philip the Fair's attempt in the fourteenth century to destroy the Knights Templar for witchcraft and sacrilege.

Now this icon provides a gateway for the spooks of the sickening 'shrooms. The sentient mushrooms, as Crossman and his companions learn, use the DNA extracted from the facial flesh of their victims to construct replicas of the whole bodies of people. There is only one way of distinguishing the clone from the original: a faint line outlining the puffed face, which is pasted on to the homunculi, a wonderfully creepy, if ludicrous, image.

Even though to many readers this storyline may seem farcical, it is played out in a completely straight and serious manner. If it's a joke, it's done completely deadpan, and works in its own terms extremely well.

Macdonald's writing is simply flows, with dialogue jumping from page to page in a way that reminded me of the rapid-fire conversations on *The West Wing*. The characters and the intense action of the novel have the feel of a superb role-playing adventure.

The chapters flash back and forth between Crossman's current adventure and his final mission as a government operative. These two storylines twist and connect into a pleasant surprise at the end of the book. The character of Crossman himself is the type of Chow Yun Fat hero-villain that I love to see on the big screen and whose exploits are so enjoyable to follow on the page. He is not some angst-ridden do-gooder, but a dark and layered character who pulls you into Macdonald's world of shadow, mystery, and magic.

While all the loose ends are tied up at the end of this adventure, enough of the characters' possible futures are left open for the reader to imagine further adventures, plots, and deeper danger. Although I haven't read any of James Macdonald's other books, if they are anything like *The Apocalypse Door*, I think I have found a new author to add to my list.

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Memory by Linda Nagata

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$26.95 hc; 464 pages

reviewed by Greg L. Johnson

On Jubilee's world, the silver rises in the night, and changes everything it touches. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, the silver reshapes buildings, re-routes roads, and kills any person who comes in contact with it. Then, when Jubilee meets a man who can survive in the silver, a man who asks the whereabouts of her brother taken years before by the silver, she sets out to find the brother she thought dead and the secrets of the world she lives on.

Memory, says the blurb on the back cover, is a novel "of technology indistinguishable from magic." That would seem to place it in the realm of science fantasy, stories where the characters' world seems to depend on the existence of "magic" that by the end of the book is revealed to actually be technology in disguise. By following Arthur C. Clarke's dictum regarding magic and technology, writers can create a kind of hybrid story that at its best combines the thrill of heroic fantasy with the enjoyment that comes from figuring out the premises underlying a good science fiction story. *Memory*, though, doesn't quite fit into this category; the premise that Nagata is exploring here is not so much that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, but more that such is also the case with a technology that you have forgotten how to control.

As becomes quickly apparent in the novel, the technology that is out of control in *Memory* is nanotech. Nanotechnology has been a consistent trope for Nagata, from her early novels through the most recent, *Limit of Vision*. There is little attempt in *Memory* to disguise what is going on. Jubilee's world, from its temples built around wells that release tiny machines known as kobolds to its motor scooters that run

for days on a tiny battery, is inhabited by people who know that something has happened to make their world what it is, but have forgotten what it was, or even that it's possible to do anything about it. It's not that the inhabitants think of their world as magical. It's simply a place, and because they have lost the understanding of how to use it, the technology that pervades their existence has to be treated as a force of nature rather than something that was created and can be controlled.

For that reason, while *Memory* has some of the outward trappings of fantasy, it is at its heart a science fiction novel, and as such is comparable not to the classic science fantasies of Jack Vance or even the more recent work of Jeff VanderMeer, but much more to two recent hard SF novels, C. J. Cherry's *Hammerfall* and *Ventus* by Karl Schroeder. Like *Memory*, both these novels present us with worlds that are artifacts of nanotech. In all three, people live what we would consider a low-tech existence. In *Ventus*, the nanotech is actively working to suppress the human population's technological growth. In *Hammerfall*, competing nanotechnologies war incessantly beneath the surface of a planet that has been turned into a desert. The inhabitants of *Memory* live in stone and wooden villages. But in all three it is apparent to the reader, if not to the characters, that there is a rigorously thought-out technology underlying the created world. If there is a mixture of science and fantasy here, it is a surface layer of fantasy built over not just an SF foundation, but a hard SF foundation.

It's in the story that *Memory* most resembles a fantasy. Jubilee is on a quest, and on her journey she meets many strange and wonderful things. That she also is on a journey to understand herself becomes

more and more apparent as the story goes on. That such understanding is necessary for the resolution of the plot and for solving the underlying mystery makes it all fit together.

Indeed, in terms of sheer artistry, *Memory* is Nagata at her very best. This is world-building at a high level. Nagata mixes in the clues as to the reality of Jubilee's world with a deft touch. People are referred to as "players," there are abundant clues that everyone has been subjected to some kind of genetic manipulation, and it is well known that when people die they are reborn as children. Nagata provides just enough explanation, and leaves just enough mystery, for the reader to be making new discoveries right up to the final pages of the novel.

A good example comes as Jubilee has just left home, and for the first time we get a look at the night sky above her:

The night was clear, the stars bright and plentiful, but the Bow of Heaven had faded entirely from sight. Unlike the stars, the Bow does not rise and set but remains always at the Zenith. Even when it seems to disappear, it's not really gone. With a telescope, it can still be seen as a thin, black ribbon eclipsing the stars. What it truly is, no one can say. The best telescopes show no detail. Even when its light is bright, all

that can be seen is a glowing, rounded surface as if of some fine flawless glass. By observing the way it eclipses stars, scholars have estimated that it is two hundred thousand miles above the surface the world—an indomitable gulf that cannot be crossed by any physical means.

We never do find out just what the Bow of Heaven is, but Jubilee's description of it tells us much about her world and how her people have learned to live with it.

If there is any problem, it's that over the latter third of the novel, as the story focuses on Jubilee and her decision, several minor characters get pushed out of the narrative. We get filled in on what happened to them at the end, but they are interesting enough in themselves that it would have been nice to experience their adventures directly. That said, *Memory* is one of those books that is enjoyable both as a good story and for the way the author practices her craft. It was a pleasure to read, and readers who are already familiar with Nagata's work should find that it ranks with 1998's *Vint* as the best of her books. ►

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Crossfire by Nancy Kress

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 364 pages
reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The term "science fiction" suggests there is a tension in the very structure of the literature we read and write. "Science" evokes knowledge, ideas, system; "fiction" is more a matter of understanding, character, story. These are not necessarily contradictory, but they do tend to pull in opposite directions. Harnessing them, using that creative tension to drive the novel, is what makes for truly great science fiction; but it is not an easy task, and it is all too easy for an author to fumble and drop the reins. What results then is one of those works awash with literary values but with nothing fresh, nothing intellectually challenging to say; or else one of those dismal, often embarrassing generic novels in which the story is swamped by all-concealed and undigested novelty. Nancy Kress, especially in the "Beggars" trilogy and in numerous short stories, has controlled this tension better than most, but in *Crossfire* the reins slip.

This book is so overloaded with plot devices and science-fictional "ideas" that the author leaves herself no room for storytelling beyond a succession of mind-numbing coincidences, while characterization has been reduced to the level of a cartoon. Believing impossible things is part of our job as science fiction readers, but we believe them because they are set within a context that make them ring true, because they are buttressed by the support mechanisms of literature. If we are convinced by the character, we are more likely to be convinced by the things she does, the worlds she travels through. We are happy to accept a society in which certain people are rendered sleepless by genetic modification if those characters behave in a way it seems likely sleepless people would behave: one major alteration in genetic makeup does not also wipe out the myriad jealousies and generosity that make up familiar flawed humanity. But if what tempts us to suspend our disbelief is missing, if the actors in the drama are characterized only by one broad trait and not by the complex mixture of good and bad found in anybody we are likely to know, then we are unlikely to go along with the immense demands on our credulity made by an overwrought plot.

Crossfire simply has too much going on. We are asked to accept that this is the story of the first human colony on an alien world, a colony entirely constructed by private enterprise with no government support. Further, those who have come up with the millions needed to buy their way into this expedition include a deposed Saudi prince and his entourage, a tribe of wannabe Amerindians, and a community of Quakers. And all this is led by a dynamic, youthful multimillionaire with a shady past. Okay, the setup feels schematic and unlikely, but I could go along with it as the basis for a story if these various groups and characters allowed subtle tensions and insights to emerge.

Alas, they don't: the Arab is simply oriental and mysterious, the pretend Cherokee are prickly and self-reliant, the leader of the Quakers

is so unfulfilling an advocate of peace that one wants to scream at him that normal people occasionally have doubts, while his punkish rebel daughter simply does exactly the opposite of him at every turn. Meanwhile, though we are repeatedly told that our dynamic multimillionaire hero did something disreputable in the past (though it takes an awful long time to get any idea of what it actually was), what we actually see is him behaving like the good guy in everything he does. Our confidence in the story, therefore, is tested from the outset.

Unfortunately, this is only the very beginning of a story that gets more complex and more ludicrous with every page. The uninhabited alien planet turns out to have a small settlement of intelligent, kangaroo-like creatures—the first alien race ever encountered—but they have no technology and no curiosity about the humans, and are not native to this world. Then other settlements are found, the inhabitants of which all have distinctly different behavioral characteristics. Is this world the setting for some curious experiment? We have, I must admit, the makings here of a very satisfying sf puzzle, though it hardly needs the particular paint-by-numbers construction of the human colony to establish and resolve such a puzzle.

Ah, but again there is more that must be loaded on this particular camel's back. A spaceship arrives, piloted by yet another alien race: intelligent plants. Plants, moreover, which have not one iota of DNA in their make-up: bang goes the panspermia theory. These plants are peaceful beings who respond to our Quakers; yet they are also locked in a seemingly eternal war with the kangaroo-like aliens. How two such races ever came to war is never questioned in the novel, as with so much else in the book, anything that fits the demands of the plot must be so.

There are still more twists and turns to come. A plot by the peace-loving plants to defeat the aggressive kangaroos can only be put into practice by the humans that neither race had previously encountered. There is, of course, an omniscient physicist who can figure out how to fly an alien spacecraft with the barest of instructions. And so on and so forth.

If novel ideas were all that is required to make good science fiction, then this would be a prime example of the genre. Forty or fifty years ago this sort of science fiction, a breathtaking assault of novelties, a continuous gosh-wow effect that leaves no time to question the sense of what is going on, would have been acceptable as a decent example of the genre. But ideas anchored in no conceivable reality are empty, science fiction that ignores the contribution of the fiction to the science is trivial. This is a trivial work from someone who can—and usually does—do much better. Minor Kress. ►

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For Love and Glory by Poul Anderson
New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 300 pages
reviewed by Joe Sanders

This is Poul Anderson's last book.

That doesn't mean that more books won't appear bearing his name. There may be collections of his shorter works, omnibus groupings of novels, posthumous collaborations based on outlines or notes, etc. These days, as Lawrence Sanders and V. C. Andrews have proven, mere death cannot stand in the way of a long, prolific writing career. But *For Love and Glory* is the last novel that Poul Anderson actually finished writing.

The great temptation is to make more of it than it deserves, to treat it as the perfect summation of Anderson's life and thought, the kind of thing Sturgeon attempted in *Godbody* and Heinlein in *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*. In fact, *For Love and Glory* is an unpretentious, relatively brief, action novel. Its most obvious virtue is its efficient professionalism, the fact that it's a straightforward good read.

That's not, come to think of it, such a minor virtue. Anderson's career as a professional writer spanned half a century. One of the first books I received in 1954 as a member of the Ballantine Science-Fiction Preview Club (\$4 for their next twelve 35-cent original paperbacks, mailed monthly in little padded baggies) was Anderson's *Brain Wave*, his first adult sf novel and one of his best. It did seem that much of Anderson's really superior fiction was done early in his career, before he figured out how to produce a high volume of writing without much difficulty. Although the routine he settled into was a mostly enjoyable one, I stopped reading much of Anderson's work after *The Avatar* (1978), which struck me as bloated and self-indulgent (though Clute and Nichols consider it one of his outstanding novels). Partly that was because of the rightward tilt in Anderson's social thinking, but mainly it was because he seemed content to write stuff that was just good enough to compete for potential readers' attention and beer money. At the time, I didn't appreciate the skill required to turn out dependably good reads year after year for decades.

This brings us back to *For Love and Glory*. According to the flap copy, this is a story about "Lissa, a human Earth woman, and her partner, 'Karl,' a giant alien academic," who clash with a pair of "freebooters" for possession of an artifact from the Forerunners, an

ancient race that has disappeared from the galaxy. Right—and wrong. That's where the novel starts, but that episode is soon over, having led on to new subjects. Lissa's alien partner disappears from the action long before readers have a chance to get tired of him, and she dismisses Hebo, the human male freebooter, as a jerk. She goes on more expeditions, falls in love but discovers that her space captain lover is sadly, dangerously flawed and leaves him. Hebo, who's being smothered by too many memories, travels to trans-human Earth to have his past edited back to a manageable level. Life goes on.

With a little less authorial concern, *For Love and Glory* might feel episodic or even rambling; instead, it feels dynamic but groping, like life itself. In real life, for example, you don't always keep the same crew you began with, and someone who first looks like a boor may be worth loving with more experience, more encounters over time. Time to gather more experience is something these characters have, since they're not quite immortal but can expect to live very, very long lives. They realize how unlikely it is that human relationships will last very long. They also realize how important those relationships are anyway.

The novel's characters look around their universe, at the presence of the Forerunners' machines and the superhuman consciousness that Earth has become. They find themselves in conflict with alien beings or other humans—conflict seems to be inevitable for intelligent life at an early stage of development—for territory or material goods. Sometimes experience shows them ways to cooperate so they can achieve those immediate goals. But they also find different ends to strive for, such as technological knowledge and the chance to be present at a stellar event and gather data that will generate more theoretical understanding. Above all, they discover the value of love and glory. Unlikely as it seems, these apparently ephemeral qualities turn out to be the core of humanity in the longest, largest perspective.

So the story works as the "science fiction adventure" it's marketed to be. Besides that, its grand, calm view of a vast universe and of tiny but passionately alive humanity makes this an unexpectedly poignant book. It's a good read with soul, a worthy leavetaking. ▶

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The Etched City by K. J. Bishop
Canton, Ohio: Prime Books, 2003; \$16.95 tpb; 336 pages
reviewed by Faren Miller

Imagine the Wild West as part of a fantastical world reconfigured by a dystopian J. G. Ballard (with some help from Max Ernst). The Copper Country is just a harrowing trek away from an old tropical city that lies not far from the heart of darkness and serves as a breeding ground for the surreal. K. J. Bishop takes us there in *The Etched City*, her powerful first novel. She's Australian, and her country's extremes of arid outback and lush forests contribute to the book's vividly realized settings. So do a wide range of literary/artistic sources I've only begun to suggest. But this is no beginner's pastiche of influences—Bishop weaves everything into a sophisticated dark fantasy that's all her own.

At the start the ambience is Western noir, along with a touch of politics in the form of a recently quashed rebellion. Gwynne, a northerner with the pale skin and martial skills of Moorcock's Elric (though not albino or as outrageously over-the-top), has flung himself into the life of a gunslinger/desperado with his own gang of bandits roving the land. Raule, a reserved woman born in the Copper Country, is now employing her old army medic skills as an innkeeper doctor. Moss of the idealism that drove them to fight against the system—a good fight, we gather, though the foe's brutality and corruption are only suggested—has given way to cynicism or resignation, and it's only by chance that the two meet again. Soon they discover there's still a price on their heads and a military squad in hot pursuit. Obviously it's time to get out, but where? Raule has heard of great cities in a region well

to their west, and the last remnants of her old ideals move her to look for that exotic thing, good work in a genuine civilization. Gwynne decides to go with her.

The city of Ashamold proves to be far past its prime, but its academies are still snooty enough to turn away any ragtag woman claiming to be a doctor and Raule has to settle for work in a slum hospital. Gwynne characteristically lands on his feet, joining a gang of enforcers for a big-time crook whose ventures include skimming the cream off the slave trade and running a saloon/entertainment spot which showcases his own woman Tareda, a bluesy singer something like a homegrown Billie Holiday. The overall ambience of urban decay (circa the grimy late nineteenth-early twentieth century) combined with more out-of-elements recalls the work of current quasi-Dickensian surrealists like Méville and VanderMeer, but Bishop mixes in a little more of that Western noir along with the loser mentality of expatriates in warm climes—Conrad meets *Cambialand*.

It's a great setting for self-tortured obsessives. Raule the belevered-pessimist seems almost upbeat beside Gwynne's fellow northerner and enforcer Marlott, who becomes wildly fixated on the female singer. And then there's the Rev, the slum hospital's resident priest and drunkard who seeks personal redemption through a mad scheme of rescuing Gwynne's errant soul by out-debating him. Even laid-back Gwynne obsesses to some extent as he follows devious clues to find a mysterious female artist, and Raule becomes locally known for

the collection of mutant fetuses and stillbirths which she keeps in an eerie chamber of glass jars.

Three years pass, and then things really fall apart. Initially, there's a series of suspenseful but "mundane" events—the crime lord's main business thrown into disarray by an apparent stooge, gang infighting, a killer out for vengeance for his murdered wife, while outside the moonson rages. . . . But Bishop has already laid hints of stranger forces at work: things like Raule's encounter with the urban legend of a creature destined to rescue slumdweller from bondage (a sort of half-crocodile Moses); the Rev's party trick of conjuring cigarettes and matches, as well as more intimate moments spent alone with his own stigmata; and Gwynne's drug-induced dreams and visions that contain disturbing truths. And what about the artist's theory that each of us lives in a private world, and that when those worlds merge or collide we had better expect the unexpected (and make the most of it)?

All this comes in a voice and style very much Bishop's own, interweaving strong action and striking backgrounds with more subtle

elements, seemingly random images and remarks. During an episode of pent and flight, the mood briefly changes when Raule finds a list of oddly poetic military pass-codes (which we're told never proves useful): "You went yesterday; today the watchdog barks so loudly." "Old seedpods on the ground, hardly worth the wind's trouble." "You and I, gecko—the moonlit road's ours tonight." Much later, in far different surroundings, Raule has this passing insight: "It occurred to [her] that all children were monsters in the world and were instinctively aware of it." Like a novelist of old, Bishop deals with the vagaries of cities, the church, men and women—in short, the human condition—while as a fantasist she pays equal attention to the inhuman, or the pull of the fantastic on our minds: dreams of heaven, lost powers and faith regained, a perfect society, amoral metamorphosis. Worldly, magical, and slyly subversive with regard to transcendence, *The Etched City* is a remarkably sophisticated debut by a writer of great promise. ▶

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The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories by Jeffrey Ford

Urbana, Illinois: Golden Gryphon Press, 2002; \$23.95 hc; 247 pages

reviewed by Eugene Reynolds

Like Holy Mother Church herself, split into laity and clergy, Catholic fantasy and science fiction divides into two camps, which may be termed the demotic and the hieratic or, more simply, the rank-and-file and the hierarchy. It is a matter of perspective taken, of whether the author, involved in matters of faith and theology, looks at them from a ground-up vantage or a heaven-down angle. Rank-and-file Catholic *f/sf* concentrates on the problems of the here-and-now, the concerns of daily life that are complicated by the intrusion of the fantastic, an intrusion that must somehow be contained by an application of the same faith and rituals that sustain the believer in more mundane times. Hierarchy *f/sf* opens up the speculation to matters cosmic, abstracting character in favor of scholastic speculation. James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, a noted work entangles religious faith and atheist science, peers from the most scholarly of Church positions, that of Jesuit priest. Mary Doria Russell puts a foot on both sides in her first-contact series *The Sparrow/Children of God*, making her tragic protagonist a Jesuit priest and her heroic protagonist a child-prostitute-turned-computer-scientist. There is more than a whiff of class division at work, as well. Rank-and-file characters fill Lenten boxes with nickels and dimes; hierarchical characters endorse churches. Rank-and-file hath not hierarchy's privileges.

Filled with blue-collar golem builders, courts of fools and ne'er-do-wells, addicts hiding inside Hollywood stars, and down-on-their-luck brain sales reps, Jeffrey Ford's stories in this new collection are squarely in the rank-and-file camp, down among the enlisted in the war against cold, loveless entropy. Officers do make appearances, but their ways are mysterious, their affect cold, even when they are on the side of Good, Billy Joel, in "Only the Good Die Young," sang that he would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, Ford prefers to do both his laughing and crying with the common folk, the much put upon bedrock of the Church, the ones who struggle through daily life without a sense of destiny, mission, or vocation, only a sense of surety in their own limitations and the adequacy of a personal response to the universal challenges.

Whatever its choice of perspective, Catholic *f/sf* deals with matters doctrinal and institutional. The works may not take place inside the cathedral, but they are always within its shadow. Ford kicks off the first story in the collection, "Creation," with kids raking a CCD class in Catholic doctrine (mandatory for those not blessed with the advantage of a parochial school education) and drilling in the Baltimore Catechism. We are in prime Catholic childhood territory, in the years before and even just after the great loosening known as Vatican II. Uncertainty lurks despite all the unquestioning rote memorization of questions and answers about God, the creation of humanity, and the meaning of life. The protagonist, a boy who balances fear of Hell against respect for his unbelieving father's swift,

foot-delivered ("size ten") justice, does what any bored student would do. He asks the unasked questions, the ones about Adam's physical existence ("Was dirt the first thing Adam tasted?"), the questions that have no approved answers. And he does what classic scientists do, what Victor Frankenstein did—he experiments. He builds a man, not of flesh but of botanical bits and pieces, arming him with spear and catechism book to protect him from dangers earthly and unearthly, and infusing him with the breath of life from a jar of his father's exhaled cigarette smoke (which has the advantage of being visible). And, as with his predecessor Dr. Frankenstein, the subject gets away, and he pursues it through the forest of his birth. Unlike Victor and their garden-based Original, though, he does not fail his creation morally. He faces up to his responsibility, admitting to his actions and enlisting his father in the hunt, and finally confronts his tree bark-covered offspring's cry of existential despair by proclaiming his love for it (even as he suspects his words may be false). True or false, he gives the golem solace before it collapses. Was it real? Did any of it happen? Does it matter? The catechism question "Why did God make you?" gets the answer it deserves. Ford's answer is truer than doctrine, its text a more sacred work to the laity than what they are officially given. The story mingles the profane and the sacred in ways that reinforce both.

In the title story, we are transported into the lurid world of commercial heroic fantasy and the even more lurid world of the commercial heroic fantasy writer. Ashmolean, the writer, writes of the mighty warrior Glandar of Kreeganvale. Mary, our college-swooning teenage narrator, takes a job cataloging his many chronicles of Glandar to help prevent the disaster of an inconsistency showing up in the unimpeachable volume of the series. She wades through reams of cliché-ridden purple prose to determine if The Horse with No Mane has ever been to the Land of Fog (yes, twice) because Ashmolean is as much of a character as Glandar. They are both stereotypes, the one a physically unattractive, asocial recluse, the other a "rugged thug of mountainous muscle." Critics adore them, and fans can't buy enough Kreeganvale doormat stories. Every ending is a happy one, perpetually. Until one day, when Ashmolean stops writing. And he asks Mary to finish the book for him.

He reveals that he has been losing his vision of Kreeganvale, and he hired Mary, whom he could tell was a dreamer and a writer at heart, to continue the story to its end. Despite her self-doubts, she enters into the world of Kreeganvale, discovers that Glandar seeks release from the never-ending saga of wenching and swordwielding, and she delivers the release that both character and author desire. Then, after killing Glandar, she flees the devastated Ashmolean. And she finds out two things, that she misses the raw excitement that Ashmolean infused into Kreeganvale ("One must retain a zest for the battle") and that she is a writer herself. For Ashmolean had touched her with his passion for his

creation and with his willingness to sacrifice his only begotten son for her redemption. Greater love has no writer than to give up his life, his literary life, for his assistant. Even if that sacrifice turns out to have been predicated on a pretense, all for Mary's sake? Yes, especially then, for the mystery of the divine sacrifice is exactly that it is performed entirely for human benefit, not for heavenly reasons. While the pretense seems a bit unbelievable (how altruistic can a working writer afford to be!), the intent is noble, and the pastiche of commercial fantasy will please anyone who has read a doostopper or three in her day.

"The Woman Who Counts Her Breaths" could be described as obsessive-compulsive by those of us of a modern, psychological bent. Or she could be deemed observant by those of us of a traditional, religious mindset. Dorothy counts everything, has lived a regimented life ever since childhood, and claimed growing up that the Devil (actually, a large rat) haunted her bedroom. Significantly, her worries are best appreciated in the story by the family of immigrant Italian Catholics, the Calabrias, who live upstairs from her. This piece is not a story, having only disconnected narrative chunks; Ford describes it as a Freudian case study in fiction. But the character portrait is well-lamned, the sharply caustic lines of a harsh life coming through clearly.

"At Reparat's" features the destruction of a grandiloquent court of misfits, beggars, and thieves whose rescuer, Ingress, becomes their exiler when his melancholy achieves physical form as a giant moth that devours the castle in which they dwell. Despite their impoverishment and the surviving of their functional (if antic) community, the characters do suffer and thrive back out in the world which had previously proven too hard or too painless for them before their lives at Reparat's court. The narrator, Flam, shorn of his title of the High and Mighty of Next Week, retains his dutiful attitude if not his duties (which included fly-fishing for bats to help control the mosquitoes in Reparat's gardens). He and the former Countess Frouch (more formerly a prostitute) find menial jobs, minimal security, and each other. The meek, if they haven't exactly inherited the earth, have reclaimed enough of it to suit themselves. They have learned not to store up treasure that thieves can steal or moths devour, but to put their faith in imperishable things, like faith, hope, and love. The story is surreal in content and matter-of-fact in its dialogue and tone. Perhaps we can call it "real magicism" and commend Ford for working in a new idiom. Or simply enjoy it for its grown-up rendering of a simple truth.

In "The Honeyed Knot," a college writing instructor gives witness to the unaccountable acts of mystery that weave in and around the stories that his students compose. At its heart, there is a deer with a crooked antler that pierces its own cheek. Propheesied by an older student whose stories are transcriptions of her visions, the deer is struck and killed when it runs out in front of the narrator's car. And then it reappears, by sight or by name, to him and to others. There is an explicit parallel of storytelling and spell-casting, here, of the magic made by braiding words together. It is a magic that does not remain simply on the page but escapes out into the world. Or perhaps the magic of the world infuses the prose. Either way, through crooked and obscure connection, all of the students who leave without completing the course in different semesters are bound into a narrative that redeems their teacher from his fears of having failed to help them touch the magic. The narrator takes as his own assignment to write this story, to bear witness. And the deer? Well, medieval Christian iconography associated animals that bear self-inflicted wounds with Jesus, who sheds blood to redeem sinners. The Gospels are accounts of that prophesied sacrifice and of the shock of reappearance that triggers the faith required for the redemption to take effect, for the writers to touch the magic. There may be too much coincidence to accept in "The Honeyed Knot" without accepting that an outside agency (Ford the author, as opposed to "Ford the writer") is responsible. But then, that is the point of the Gospels, as well.

"Malthusian's Zombie" resurrects, among other things, Julian Jaynes's provocative theory of human consciousness originating in historical (late Biblical) times. Before the start of the Christian era, Jaynes claims, human minds were divided and functioned in a schizophrenic fashion, with the superego's directives being delivered as a "foreign" thought, an internalized "voice of God." Ford's retuned "mind-fucker," Malthusian, applies Jaynes's idea in reverse on a modern subject, seeking to create a perfect agent unable to disobey a command

given by his programmer. When Malthusian dies, his unaging zombie (preserved from death by mind control, perhaps, like M. Valdemar in the Poe story that the narrator is studying) is passed on to the narrator, an English professor who came to know the old psychologist and learn of his work. Living with the narrator and his family, Tom the zombie's programming begins to unravel under their orders to remember his previous life. Communicating through sketches more easily than through words and aging quickly, the zombie is taken to the address he shakily scrawled out when asked to draw his home. Delivering the transformed creature, the narrator suddenly recognizes who he has become and where he has been taken. Like Jesus' disciples on the road to Emmaus, the narrator only realizes the identity of his companion at the moment of his disappearance. The zombie's return to consciousness from mind-death is the resurrection of Malthusian, the blooming of individual consciousness from a separated mind, the start of the Christian era. At the end, the narrator is reduced to drooling in stupefaction. I doubt that the reader will be so moved, as the resolution is reached in very short order, making Tom the zombie a little more of a cipher than he should be to engage our sympathies. But I may be asking for too much, to have a zombie be engaging.

Catholics of the enlisted class like to stay very down-to-earth and bring their idols down with them, not to denigrate them but to celebrate their closeness, their accessibility. Raucous *carnavals* where the lowly meet the highest on a first-name basis have always been popular in Catholic lands. "On the Road to New Egypt" is Ford's *carnaval*, has chance to skirt the sacrilegious by bringing Christ and Satan into the vernacular (not to say vulgar, what with Christ wailing down a Quarter-Pounder with cheese and a chocolate shake), making them hitchhikers whom his narrator gives a lift. Discussing Jesus' love life (he has a girlfriend in New Egypt, NJ), sharing a joint of Carthage Red with Satan, and taking a road trip to collect a soul in Tampa (who nearly collects the three of them instead), Jeff the narrator comes to understand that the state of the cosmos is a lot closer to the world reported on in the weekly supermarket check-out tabloids than the safe and stable world that official dogma proclaims. But then, the enlisted always knew that the officers are hiding something from us, and that even the Powers That Be aren't too solicitous, treating our souls less like sparks of divine essence and more like chips to be traded in their endless games of oneness. The humor of the story rubs uneasily against the unconcern of savior and Satan both, or the eruption of the Tampa saint's anger. *Carnaval's* festivity does frequently change into anarchy. Riotous and not are never far apart. Ford, acknowledging this closeness, ducks the issue rather than address it.

Catholic fiction, when it deals with matters Biblical, tends toward reenactment, like the allegorical medieval passion plays. The potency of scriptural material that has been withheld from the masses by its Latin secret language is so great as to discourage alteration. Plus, the parallel stories of Hebrew sacred literature ("Old Testament") and Christian ("New Testament") impress upon believers the notion of prefigurative connection between characters who have no otherwise rational link. This causality works out well in fantasy tales, and Ford's are no exception. "Creation" reenacts Genesis. With the title story, "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant," we cover the mystery of the gospels. "The Woman Who Counts Her Breaths" gives us the prescriptions of Leviticus and the enumeration of Numbers. "At Reparat's" is the Sermon on the Mount. "The Honeyed Knot" is the Passion (death narrative) of Jesus. "Malthusian's Zombie" is the resurrection, albeit in an unusual form. "On the Road to New Egypt" has the Second Coming looping back into Genesis.

The science fiction stories in the collection give Ford an opportunity to examine issues of a more abstract, theoretical nature. Science fiction, being more distant from the mythic texts than fantasy (which grew up alongside them), is a tool for dissecting the logic of dogma and of the institution. Blish's *A Case of Consciousness* is predicated on the heresy of Manichaeism, a third-century belief in the duality of the Deity, admitting to both a supreme Good and an equivalent supreme Evil. Blish wields Catholic dogma to exorcise an entire planet of ethical atheists. In Ford's "Exo-Skeleton to Coward," on a planet of movie-mad bugs, humans survive by wearing exo-suits which are made to resemble famous Hollywood stars. The bugs want movies; in return, they offer a variety of recreational pharmaceuticals,

including freemasonry, a super-aprodisiac. The narrator, dressed as Joseph Cotton, sought to make a fortune trading an "unknown" movie (*Night of the Living Dead*). His addiction to the narcotic "smoke" overcame his ambition. Reduced, he accepts a job for the mayor of Exo-skeleton Town to seduce a Hollywood starlet and get the only copy of her one good film from her. He succeeds, getting her to trade her movie for 30 minutes in an Earth-atmosphere chamber in which they can remove their suits and truly be with each other. They each confess their truths. Where he is excited by her honesty (though also disappointed), and professes his love and his desire to kick the "smoke," she crumbles and refuses to put her suit on when the half hour comes to an end. He is willing to restore the illusion, to continue the role. She chooses not to.

In this story, Ford evokes the Donatist heresy, a fourth-century rejection by purists of those Christians who lapsed from the faith in the face of Roman persecutions. The orthodox Catholics were more tolerant (especially in the cases of wealthy Christians, ready targets for persecution, asking for readmittance). The real nut was lapsed priests—could they be forgiven? And if they were readmitted, when they presided, were the rites efficacious? Orthodoxy said "Yes," the demanding Donatists refused. What matters more, the person or the position? The issue is one of the basis of identity. Is it personal or functional? The hierarchy prefers to guard its functions, leaving them unsullied and offering generous forgiveness to its members. Before the Most High, the person, any person, is nothing. But the role still carries weight. The rank-and-file is a bit more demanding, wanting its ministers to meet higher standards in exchange for their higher status. And the issue is far from being an historical curiosity. It is still very much alive; witness the current pedophilia scandals tarnishing the American Catholic clergy. The issue for the rank-and-file is less that priests sin (and become subject to criminal prosecution) than it is that the hierarchy asserts the primacy of function over failings, continuing to project the illusion of continuous service, the apostolic succession. The laity is much more willing to drop the exo-suit and wait for the chamber door to slide open. Ford tries to mediate the conflict of starlet and mayor, enlisted and officer ranks, via the weaker character of his narrator. But, weak as most of his characters start out, in the end Joseph Cotton does the right thing, or at least recognizes the right thing to do. It would be better if Ford's narrator had as much self-understanding.

"The Far Oasis" pairs off evolutionary theory and creationism. Sikes, exiled for murder, fills his days by culling Geets, the semi-intelligent bipedal inhabitants of his castaway world. Still fixated on the woman who used and refused him, Sikes refrains from killing those Geets which remind him of her. Gradually, the selection pressures have an effect, making a population of smarter, more deadly, very human-looking Geets. Sikes has made them in his own obsession's image. When he finally succumbs to his advancing age and their advancing aggressiveness, he becomes a fleshly sacrifice to his own scheme to reconstitute his lost Methusa. Nor does death end his story. Sikes achieves a resurrection, of sorts, as his cannibal "children" learn to avoid his phenotype (his flesh having made them sick), and a Sikes lineage is bred. The Christian meta-narrative, from creation through Passion and resurrection to the communion of saints, is culchimerized point for point. The schema of the tale overwhelms its attempt at fictional veracity. We don't believe the set-up, even as we can appreciate the morality of the resolution.

Slackwell, the protagonist of "Floating in Lindrethool," is out to make his one big score by selling top-of-the-line 256-B organic computing units. It's his last chance, as his sales have been off for the past few years and his corporate masters at Thinktank aren't pleased. His colleague, Merck, is selling up a storm. Slackwell, working the streets of the run-down, sooty industrial town of Lindrethool, only meets rejections and a religious zealot calling himself the bishop of Lindrethool, who tries to break the demo 256-B unit, for a 256-B is a classic human brain floating in a jar, and the bishop wants to release its trapped soul. Thinktank's executives cynically manipulate Slackwell, using the 256-B as a way to seduce him to break his employment agreement and catch him in the process, harvesting his brain as a penalty. Keeping faith

with Melody, the 256-B "occupant," Slackwell escapes the trap of Grace, his supervisor, with Merck's help.

The definition of human life and the question of when the soul enters and exits the body is tied in Catholic dogma to the question of control over the events of birth and death. The hierarchy, like Thinktank, prefers to view life as a binding contract whose terms are set irrevocably, in a top-down fashion. The rank-and-file tends to want some discretion about when the contract is in effect and when it should be suspended. Contraception and euthanasia have appeals for the common Catholics caught up in the daily grind of making a living down in the street, while the hierarchy outlaws them and demands obedience in ways that seem like manipulations of sex and mortality as control mechanisms. On his escape, after freeing/killing Melody, Slackwell is given the title of bishop of Lindrethool by Merck, in recognition of his assertion of his conscience over the corporate directives. The earliest Christian churches elected their bishops; the primacy of Rome ended that practice, but it lurks in the historical collective unconscious. Bottom-up belief beats top-down dogma, a truth too dangerous for the hierarchy to admit. Could Slackwell and Merck make it to sanctuary, on the run from Thinktank with Merck's \$40,000 sales commissions to fund their getaway? That may be where the reader needs to take a leap of faith on behalf of the author. However, it is a leap in the right direction, even if it likely falls short. *Noir* never really does happy endings well.

Not all the works in this collection view the universe through the prism of Catholicism or can be viewed themselves through it. In some, Ford relies on codes older than the Biblical ethics, like the Hammurabi code of an eye for an eye. The trick is usually figuring out whose eye is owed to whom. Even when the wronging party comes clean and makes amends to the wronged, as in the ghost-haunted "Something by the Sea," the nature of the crime remains hazy, suspending judgment of culpability and restitution. Or when the crime begets itself in a temporally loopy murder mystery-cum-horror story like "Out of the Canyon." But then, ghosts often carry their mysteries around with them, else they would lie quiet in their graves. The shortest works in the book are sketches, vignettes of surreal landscapes that Ford has yet to fully explore ("Pansolapia") or preliminary drawings of lands he is opening up ("The Delicate," a précis of his World Fantasy Award-winning *The Physiognomy*). And, in addition to the numerous Poe references, Ford presents an homage to Jules Verne ("High Tea with Jules Verne") and a pastiche of Franz Kafka ("Bright Morning").

Dense though his narratives may be, Ford retains a lightness of style. He is a postmodernist in the most traditional sense, that of an artist who follows up on the Modernists, adopting their intellectual detachment but using the distance it provides for ironic comment, aimed at a constantly shifting target. His work might be what Joyce would write if Dublin's aliens were extraterrestrial in addition to being Jewish. Identity in these stories is a slippery condition. It is not merely that his narrators are unreliable; there is a strong sense in these pieces that their author may be unreliable—in a good way, being as confused as the rest of us as to the Way Things Really Are, not in the smugly elitist fashion of the Gnostic laughing at the uninitiated. He retains his sense of humor and clearly finds himself within its ambit. The afterword to "Exo-Skeleton Town" comments on its numerous rejections: "What's not to like? It's got giant alien bugs, Hollywood stars, balls of aphrodisiacal insect shit, drug consumption through a spigot in the crotch, and Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale, shooting herself in the head." The common condition may be laughably tragic, but at least it is a joke which Ford wants us all to share. Ford's answers to the eternal questions ring truer than the best formulations that the hierarchy can provide. In writing from the perspective of the commoner, he sees farther than his betters do from the tops of their mighty cathedrals. Maybe the air is clearer down in the streets than it is up where the clouds of incense have collected. Or maybe it's just simpler to look in only one direction than it is to try and see in two directions, up and down, at once.

In the final story, "Bright Morning," the narrator, a literary

fantasy author whose books are blurbled with comparisons to Kafka, chases down an elusive Kafka story entitled "Bright Morning" that inspired his own writing career. The story, a parable about a writer drained empty by the demands of the literary life, proves impossible to find, being collected only in a single, rare anthology. For years, he is tantalized by quotes and chance references to the story in odd circumstances, from clammers, English professors, and suicidal sailors. Finally, needing to reread the story to unblock his imagination, he faces off in an auction for the anthology with another literary fantasy author, someone named Jeffrey Ford. The choice is between winning the auction and losing himself to the vampire, Literature, or losing it and saving his life for himself. It comes as no surprise that Ford wins

the auction, certainly not to those who read this anthology, somewhat easier to find than the Kafka. If it makes us do nothing more than honor as well as pity those poor wretches who pour their spirits out in cabalistic word-spells in the belief that their magic can alter the world, then Marty Halpern and Golden Gryphon Press will have done a good job, indeed. And if Jeff Ford's stories can explain to someone other than a lapsed former altar boy like me how to make it through the circles of Hell with little more than a mustard seed's worth of faith, hope, and love, then he's done God's work for Him, in truth. ▶

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Darrell Schweitzer

Funeral Games: Thoughts Upon the Death of a Bookseller

I remember it as a sunny, late winter morning, about two years ago, now. Time and chance and the press of other things prevented me from writing this essay when the impressions were immediate. But they are still vivid enough: late winter, when the snows have melted and cat trees leave great, muddy gouges in unpaved driveways.

I was standing with about twenty other people on the porch of a sprawling Victorian house, one of those bodge-podges of stone and wood with peaked gables, a turret or two, an enormous porch, and a "barn" in the back yard (actually a large garage-and-shed) which, deducing from its proximity to its neighbors (i. e., a less-than-an-acre yard), must have been what passed for a middle-class development, circa 1890.

Wayne, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, has sections of such housing. I may well have stood on this porch as a kid trick-or-treating, but now I was there for something all book-people have experienced. I was in line, early in the morning, in the company of strangers, near-strangers, and a few familiar faces, waiting for a book sale to start.

This was the house of the late Ms. _____, a lady whose name was apparently wellknown in the mailorder and Internet book business. She also sold books by appointment. She had a large invitational clientele. I never knew her and had, in fact, passed by this house many times without ever knowing what wonders were hoarded within. After her (recent) death, her family held a series of sales, first for her invitational clientele, at which everything was offered for 50% off. But today was different. It was the everything-for-a-dollar blow-out, not advertised, but more or less open to anyone. I had been tipped off by a bookseller friend. I simply showed up, acted like I belonged there, and I more-or-less did.

But as I listened to the conversation around me, as people reminisced about what a great bookseller the dead woman had been, what excellent things they had bought from her, what a shame it was to see her magnificent collection picked over like this (even as the speakers, like a school of piranhas, were prepared to wipe it out completely), I realized that I was intruding on a funeral. All the sad-and-weeepy personal stuff aside, this was the send-off that mattered in the bookselling world. A bookseller's funeral.

I take my title from a book, of course. *Funeral Games* is a novel by Mary Renault in which she extends the metaphor of "funeral games"—the various athletic contests and such which the ancient Greeks held in honor of a dead king—to describe the scramble for power as Alexander the Great's generals carved up his empire among themselves after his death. The Greek version was much more polite than the Etruscan and (later) Roman versions, where the "games" turned bloody, flattering the dead by adding to their number, as the undertakers invented gladiatorialism.

Bookseller funerals are always polite.

Now the doors were opened. We filed inside, ever so politely, nobody pushing, no elbows making contact (despite all the jokes you hear at more ordinary book sales, where the "usual suspects" make comments like, "We're all here! That's the end of this sale!")

and "I think I'll get a pair of spikes for my elbows next time!"). Some people said a few words to the family members and helpers who admitted us.

Then the race was on. Even here, there was an unspoken code, an etiquette. One may not shove. The younger and more agile persons may twist and weave a little and slip by. But you never grab something out of someone's hand, or even right under their nose (unless, in the latter case, you say "Excuse me," first).

I was at a disadvantage at this point, because most of these people, who were of the invitational clientele, had been to the earlier half-price sales, not so much to buy (since Ms. _____'s prices, even reduced by 50%, tended to be quite high) as to ease the joint. They knew exactly where everything was. All I could do was follow the crowd, while a little alarm was going off in my head: *Emergency! Emergency! Where is the science fiction section? Where are her Arkham House books?*

Sometimes, half a second before I reached a shelf, someone swept the entire contents into a box with their arm. (I think they'd done more than ease the joint. They'd very likely sneakily arranged the desired books just so during a previous visit, ready for the quick grab on the dollar-day.)

This was a piranha-frenzy, yes, but a very, very genteel one, with voices in low tones, everyone making quick, purposeful motions. Before long, piles of books began to assemble themselves, in the middle of the floor, under coats and dropcloths. Another part of the booksale code—you never, never take a book someone else has selected. That is tantamount to stealing (and in a place like this would get you kicked out). If there is any doubt, you hold up the book and ask aloud, "Does this belong to anybody?" and if it *does*, you can be certain the owner will be upon you in an instant, even if he's on the other end of a long gallery. Book people have special senses. They can feel someone else's fingers on their books from great distances. Then, you politely give it back, and everyone goes about their polite ravening.

What you do is bring a cloth or use your coat to drape over your goodies once they have become too heavy to carry. In the summer, bring a light jacket, not so much to wear as to mark territory. Another technique, which doesn't work so well in a crowded room, is to acquire the nearest cardboard box, fill it with your stuff, and push it along the floor with your foot.

The purposeful crowd spread throughout the house. I felt the inevitable anxiety: *The Heinlein first editions and the run of Weird Tales are in the OTHER room which I haven't discovered yet.*

All this overwhelming courtesy reminded me of the etiquette of trash picks. No, I don't mean bums going through trashcans—although if someone drops books into a trashcan he is, by definition, a barbarian whose opinion and contempt do not matter. (In the wealthy neighborhood where I grew up, I once discovered an entire such can full of hardcover books. I pawed through them while a passerby saw me, but I didn't pause. Nothing special, but the books didn't belong there. I later resold the first edition of *Lizzie Borden, the Untold Story* that I rescued.)

I am instead referring to *high-class* scavengers like the ones you meet at major outdoor computer fairs. Toward the end of the day, the large companies represented in the "flea market" section start disposing of their unsold inventory. So you climb into these huge Dumpsters the size of railroad cars, often deep enough (if the accumulation is insufficiently high) that nobody's head sticks up over the edge. Safety necessitates speaking loudly and maybe even stationing someone on guard at the Dumpster's edge, to make sure that incoming projectiles don't come crashing down on somebody's head. Everybody helps everybody else find whatever they're looking for: free televisions, spare parts, stacks of diskettes, or whatever. They lend screwdrivers and wrenches back and forth.

Trash picking, I like to explain, is a gentlemanly occupation, closely related to archeology. Complete strangers cooperate with one another, following an unspoken code. ("You, Sir, are a gentleman and a scholar," a techno-scavenger said to me once, "but don't worry. Your secret is safe with me.")

There was no danger of incoming books landing on someone's head at Ms. _____'s place, but it felt very much like truly elegant Dumpster-diving. It was part of the same cultural experience.

I realized, ultimately, that this wasn't an ancient Greek funeral (with foot races and discus hurling) that I'd barged in on here. It was a Ferengi funeral. Watchers of *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* will remember those comic, rascally, cheap-rate interstellar traders with the big ears who live by a sacred scripture called *The Rules of Acquisition*. There is a wonderful episode in which Quark the Ferengi has been tricked into thinking he is dying. Therefore, he does what any sensible member of his species would do under such circumstances. He endeavors to make a profit (which is all important to a Ferengi) so that he will be honorably remembered. Indeed, a dream-sequence affords us a glimpse of Ferengi Heaven, a gaudy, gold-plated shopping mall where you must present your account books to the equivalent of St. Peter, to show you made a profit in life, before they let you in.

Quark offers pieces of his own body for sale on an interstellar eBay. It seems that Ferengi corpses are freeze-dried, chopped up into little bits, encased in plastic disks, and sold as coasters. Relics of famous Ferengi become expensive collector's items.

Quark makes a "killing," if you will pardon the expression, a bigger profit than all his lifetime sales put together. Later when he discovers that, as part of a complicated conspiracy, his medical records have been switched, that he is *not* dying after all, and that an enemy has maliciously run the bidding up to incredible levels, Quark is terribly torn. He would almost rather die than give up the profit.

So, here we were, scrambling for the bits and pieces of the late Ms. _____'s life and career, thus increasing her profit and her honor, since bookseller-Ferengi are ultimately remembered for greatness of their board and the quality of their final, going-out-of-business sale. She was doing well, it seemed, from the praise I was overhearing from all around me. What great stuff she always had. What a shame to see her place taken apart like this—even as it was being taken apart.

But what about the *lost*? You want to hear about the *lost*? A tale of acquisition must include descriptions of the haul, I understand, having, as Quark would say, "the lobes" for these things.

The Rare First Editions shelf (in what must have been the dining room) was almost bare by the time I got to it, 2.3 seconds into the sale. One of the few volumes left was a book called *The Corridor of Destinies* by Melville Davidson Post from 1908 ("Correcting the tales of Randolph Mason, as related by his private secretary, Courtlandt Parks"), a beautiful, almost-new copy with a mylar protector over the boards. *What is this? I've vaguely heard of Melville Post. Some kind of Sherlockian mystery?* I drop it in my totebag (which grew to a box, which grew to a pile on the floor under my coat) to buy and sort out later.

If there was an Arkham House shelf or a pile of *Weird Tales*, I did not find it. I don't think so. One of the things I always do (and I am sure most of you do too) when visiting an unfamiliar house is to glance at the books on the shelves. They tell so much about the person who lives there.

Ms. _____ was a conventional literary person, although one of considerable refinement. She sold what she knew and liked, which was very sensible of her. You will never succeed in bookselling unless you can think like your customer and appreciate what they appreciate. Her stock included a lot of poetry and art books, and a lot of odd little items from the nineteenth century with interesting bindings. There was no science fiction section, though I found a couple of late Heinlein first editions (*To Sail beyond the Sunset*, and *The Cat Who Walked through Walls*), along with a British first of Arthur C. Clarke's *The Ghost from the Grand Banks* in the mainstream literature/modern first editions section. (Not that they're particularly worth anything. Not that I have since been able to resell them. But when something like that is a buck, you take it now and ask questions later.) The one old science fiction book was Ralph Milne Farley's *The Radio Man* in hardcover, published by FPCI, 1948. I suspect I was the only person there who knew what that was. It had been left behind on that nearly sweep-clean Rare First Editions shelf.

It was interesting to note that no one showed much interest in the mainstream/modern first editions area. *Those* shelves were packed solid, hours into the sale. I could go through them at leisure, after the initial frenzy had long abated, pick out the above-mentioned Heinleins and the Clarke, and also find a Salman Rushdie book I didn't have, *The Jaguar Smile, A Nicaraguan Journey*.

Upstairs, in a little side room which had gotten messy—debris on the floor, papers, envelopes, even a few boards from the crumbling leather-bound volumes on a nearby shelf—I found a first edition of Kipling's *With the Night Mail* in the midst of that same pile of debris. A nice copy, with one plate loose. I shall have to carefully examine another copy to see precisely where that plate goes before I glue it back in. Then the book will be worth about \$100.00.

In that same room was an entire shelf of Christopher Morley first editions which had apparently interested no one. Poor Christopher Morley. His star has fallen.

After a while, as the crowd thinned out a bit (politely, politely . . .), it was time to *realpick* over the remains. Now (as long-time customers, my fellow Ferengi who had actually known Ms. _____, lamented) the house was beginning to look a bit shabby, many of the shelves (save for mainstream modern first editions) almost bare, books fallen onto the floor. It was time to grab the expensive literary reference books in what must have once been an office—books that had not been for sale when Ms. _____ was alive. *Wow. The Penguin Companion to World Literature*, a boxed, four-volume set, in immaculate condition. It counted as one item. I got it for a buck. I found an odd little book called *The Poet, the Fool, and the Fairies* by Madison Cawein (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1912), a volume of verse, with nicely gilt-decorated boards. Immaculate condition. The title item seems to be a play of sorts ("A Lyrical Eclogue"). Is this worth reading/owning/selling? Buy now, research later.

Two hours into the sale, as I had assembled my first couple of crates of books and was mulling around the check-out table, I noticed Peter Ruber's *The Last Bookman* (a coffee table-sized volume of tributes to Vincent Starrett, a great member of our tribe, Candlelight Press, 1968) among the cookbooks by the kitchen. After the feeding-frenzy, you have to look for odd misshelings like that.

I'd gone through everything, in every room of the house that was open to the public. How did I feel picking through the books in the shelf over Ms. _____'s bed, the ones which were her obvious favorites, which she read through before she went to sleep each night? Did I feel like a ghoul, a scavenger, a tomb-raider? . . . Hell no. She was *one of us*. She would have understood. We were helping her orphaned books find good homes. Even though I had never known her, I honored her, by making her last bookshelf all the more memorable (at least to me). While I can remember what books I bought from her stock, she lives on through them. It's all part of the Code. Quark the Ferengi would understand, too, and would salute her.

So there I was at checkout, maybe two and a half hours after this all started. I had just scarfed the copy of *The Last Bookman* (which ultimately turns out to be only worth about \$50, according to

ABEBooks.com listings, but was still a pleasant find) when I learned, again from overheard conversation that the "barn" out back was also full of books.

Oh my God. . .

The sellers had made a major strategic error, which worked to my advantage. I deserved some advantage after everybody else got the jump on me in the first minutes of the sale. They should have put up a huge sign saying MORE BOOKS IN BARN, but possibly, since even this sale was not, theoretically, open to the public, they didn't want to get mobbed. Or else they just didn't think of it. In any case, few of my fellow book-vultures (some of whom were elderly) had braved the ankle-deep mud in the unpared driveway and the puddles in the back yard to go out to the barn. It was almost untouched. That was where I found the early William Morris book, the Dunsany first edition, the Rider Haggards, the history, photography, and old periodicals section.

It went on and on. Most of this material was tangential to my own interests, but it was so stuff I could easily resell. I made, of course, a huge profit that day. My car was full when I left. I resold much of the loot to my friend the bookseller who had tipped me off about this sale in the first place. We both understood exactly what was going on. She had been unable to get away from her shop to attend. The service I had performed for her, for which I was rewarded by mark-ups on the books

I resold to her, is called, in the trade, "scouting." If you buy for a dealer, you are a book scout.

Some of the remainder I resold elsewhere. Some went into my own collection. It was not the very best book sale I had ever been to, but it was a very good one. A year or so later I got myself onto e-Bay, thus greatly expanding my capacity to resell things that I might not, myself, particularly want to keep. So of course I think back and wonder: *What should I have taken that I left behind?* At the end of such a day, as your car fills up, you begin to feel a sense of "restraint." Maybe I have enough. Maybe I should leave a little for somebody else. What am I going to do with all this stuff? In retrospect, you always come to appreciate a further Law of Acquisition which Quirk the Ferengi has not yet explicitly revealed to humans: *Restraint is for later.*

Hail and farewell to the valiant Ms. _____, whom I never knew. Thus do I praise and remember her. Thus did we all praise and remember her. By the time the sale was over, I was no longer an interloper, but one more of her mourners. I could have addressed anybody there by first name, if I knew their first name.

This kind of funeral sure beats having yourself chopped up into little bits and sold as coasters.

And a profit, of course, is not without honor. ►

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Hannah's Garden by Midori Snyder
New York: Viking, 2002; \$16.99 hc; 256 pages
reviewed by Michael Levy

Midori Snyder is the highly regarded author of *The Innamorati*, *Sadara's Keep*, *The Flight of Michael McBride*, and other well-done works of adult fantasy, but *Hannah's Garden*, so far as I know, is her first young adult novel. In a sense, it's a book many of us have read before. Charles de Lint has worked several variations on Snyder's basic plot, as has Susan Cooper, as have any number of other writers. This, by the way, should not necessarily be taken as a criticism. The book's protagonist, Cassie, is a serious-minded teenager whose greatest loves are her violin and her boyfriend, Joe. Her major problem in life, however, is her mother, Anne. Her mom is a bright and beautiful ne'er-do-well, a woman still trying to find herself in her late thirties. Anne goes from boyfriend to boyfriend, has never settled on a career, and almost never cleans house. Although she loves her daughter fiercely, it's Cassie who ends up taking care of her mother as often as not.

Cassie never knew her father, who left before she was born. Most of her family members, many of whom had reputations for eccentricity, are now dead. Her only other living relative is her maternal grandfather, Poppie, a famous, half-mad painter. His pictures, as described by Snyder, sound very much like the kind of thing Terri Windling would do if she painted large-scale landscapes. Poppie is getting on in years and his increasingly introspective, one might even say solipsistic, nature has largely estranged him from both his daughter and his granddaughter. He has a studio on an isolated farm "up north" where the family has lived for several generations. Cassie and Anne spent some wonderful times there when Cassie was young; she particularly remembers her long-dead grandmother Hannah's wonderful garden, with its wildflowers and exotic herbs, all growing in an enormous spiral pattern. She also has dim memories of her mother leaving a bowl of milk out on the back porch at night and even, perhaps, of odd creatures, half glimpsed in the forest surrounding the farm. Still, despite those memories, it's been a couple of years since the two women have seen the old man.

Then the phone call comes. Poppie has been taken ill and is in the hospital; he may well die. Such family emergencies never come at a convenient time, of course, and Cassie must cancel both her violin recital and her prom date with Joe in order to accompany her mother and her mom's new boyfriend, a film studies professor named Gunnar, up north. The trip itself is a pleasure for the reader. One of the joys of the novel, for me at least, is its well-realized Wisconsin setting. Snyder never says that the story takes place in

Wisconsin, but the author lives in Milwaukee and the book is full of references to places like Ashland and Eagle River that are located in the northern part of the state, not very far from where I live. Even more convincing, perhaps, are the detailed descriptions of trees, flowers, and animals common to the northern forests of Wisconsin. I may never have stumbled across Hannah's garden, but I'm quite sure that I've tramped the woods in its vicinity.

Anyway, as I said before, many of you already know this story. Cassie and Joe play music down at a local bar in the southern part of the state. There they meet an incredibly talented fiddler whose music seems to have more power to it than is entirely natural. Later, of course, it hardly comes as a surprise when he turns up at the farm or when Cassie finds his unchanging face in a many decades-old photograph and on one of Poppie's recent canvases. There's also a creepy, but oddly seductive guy on a motorcycle who seems strangely interested in Cassie, and who also appears, as if by magic, wherever she goes. There are rabbits and badgers who seem oddly sentient, and an evil-smelling, ill-tempered neighbor who seems more bear than man. It will not startle the veteran reader of such tales to discover that Cassie and in fact her entire family have faerie blood and that Poppie's farm lies on the border between our world and another. Nor will it be a surprise to learn that Cassie has become a key player in the battle between two factions among the faerie folk. We've seen this story before, many times, but, even knowing what's going on long before Cassie does, we can still enjoy Snyder's well-crafted prose, her eye for detail, and her well-developed characters.

It is also important to remember, of course, that we veteran readers of fantasy are not Snyder's intended audience here. The biography at the end of *Hannah's Garden* says that the author has two teenagers, and I would guess that she wrote the book for them. For young adults coming to this volume with fresh eyes and a much less well-developed sense of how such stories go, the tale may well be a revelation, its secrets not at all obvious, its plot a thing of wonder. *Hannah's Garden* is, in fact, exactly the kind of book I'd give to a teenager, someone who loves fantasy, but who hasn't read so much of it as to become jaded. In fact, since I'm fortunate enough to have a teenager in my house, I think I'll pass this lovely book on to her as soon as I've finished proofreading my review. ►

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Fires of the Faithful by Naomi Kritzer

New York: Bantam Books: 2002; \$6.99 pb; 400 pages

reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

In a nonindustrial imaginary land of olive groves, vineyards, and city-states, long skirts, passionate art, and senseless civil war, where candlelight and magic replace electricity, and cannon are the most advanced mundane weapons, Eliana is a sixteen-year-old student at the Verdiano Rural Conservatory. A talented violinist, she's looking forward to a few years of cloistered calm, sequestered from the war and famine that surrounds this haven, followed by an equally protected career under the patronage of the Imperial Court. Then Mira comes into her life, a new roommate who has curiously little talent (for an artist) in the minor scraps of magic that make life easy. Eliana—who has expected her life to include boyfriends, lovers, eventually a father for her children—finds herself strangely attracted to this young woman. She begins to receive fugitive, inexplicable visions of herself as a savior, a girl in a warrior's armor; the protector of the Goddess. While she protects Mira through fits of what seems like epilepsy, she little suspects that the Conservatory is actually harboring a renegade, in hiding from the group of powerful Mages who rule the land. Mira has discovered a devastating secret, which puts her in an unlikely alliance with the keepers of the faux-Christian Old Faith and makes her

an enemy of the Fedeli, the death-dealing inquisitors and religious fanatics who have become feared in these troubled times.

Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with genre fantasy, or fairytales of any kind, will spot immediately that Mira's problem with magic is not that she doesn't have enough of it, so I'm giving nothing away when I say that she turns out to be the youngest member of the Circle of Mages. She has fled in horror from her appointed destiny, because she's discovered that the increasingly large-scale use of magic is savagely assaulting the life-force of the land. The change from the restraint of the old religion to the new creed of magical capitalism is causing a spreading blight on all growing things and fostering the hostilities that have left half the country scorched earth, with refugee camps huddling around the fortresses. The blame for this hidden holocaust seems to be a fairly open secret once Eliana leaves her cloister and goes out into the world, but it's only when the Fedeli turn up at the Conservatory, taking brutal measures against dissent, that Eliana gets her political consciousness raised. Eliana sets out into the troubled world to meet the destiny that has been foreshadowed in her visions.

The twenty-first century has seen a renaissance in the darker and

Screed (letters of comment)

David Langford, Reading, England

A footnote to the May NYRSE: When reviewing Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* for a British magazine, I assumed (but didn't have space to mention) that the conceit about the soul lagging behind the body on long air flights was deliberate homage to a literary master. What a surprise to read that William Gibson, as interviewed by Candace Jane Dorsey, regards it as "a piece of hippie folklore." Maybe, but it's also the theme of an impressionistic travel article by that notorious hippie William Golding: "Body and Soul," collected in Golding's *The Hot Gates* (1986).

David V. Griffin, Brooklyn, New York

Darrell Schweitzer is an interesting author and a consistent and literate critic, but his writing in "The Uses of Fantasy" appears to be tainted with that mixture of bathos and behumburgery that characterizes the stony allegiance of the fan as opposed to the opinion of a constant reader.

Although I simply disagree with Schweitzer on certain views that he propounds in his essay, I feel that his remarks concerning the relation of fantasy to literature as a whole necessitate an attempt at partial refutation. That Schweitzer's tone throughout the essay is slightly facetious does not make the by-rote assumptions he lapses into on this point any less horrible.

This anti-pleasure Protestant Work Ethic of Literature he cites, for one—I've certainly heard of this bugaboo before. But is there anyone outside of the genre itself who actually believes that such a thing has any bearing on how Americans buy and read books? Stephen King is not only probably the best-selling American author of all time, he's also a writer with multiple sales to *The New Yorker* under his belt. If we allow thrillers and romances into an equation that also includes fantasy and science fiction, I think it becomes evident that most Americans do buy books for pleasure.

And then this "realism of the grimmest sort" that Schweitzer finds essential for an author's entry into Real, Serious Literature—who exactly is meant by this? Harold Pinter? Raymond Carver? George Eliot? Gore Vidal? Would Schweitzer say that there is no pleasure to be derived from reading these authors and those like them? Or merely that realism is okay as long as it isn't grim?

What about fantasy of the grimmest sort? Philip K. Dick is possibly the greatest American science fiction author of the post-war period, and his myriad depictions of a rotting, lunatic-suburban world might have been envied by Nathaniel West. H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" contains passages descriptive of working-class decay that equal any from George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, even if the conclusions the writers draw are diametrically opposed.

Schweitzer goes on to say that "such ideology [pro-grim realism and anti-fantasy] still prevails in mainstream critical circles, [such as] *The New York Times Book Review* . . . which is why John Updike is taken very seriously indeed and Gene Wolfe, say, is not. It has little to do with the quality of their writing."

Here I refer to a recent randomly selected copy of *The New York Times Book Review* (03/23/03). Of the six works of fiction reviewed in this issue, two can be described as fantasy or fantastic. Carey Harrison's positive review of Edward Carey's *Alva & Iva* deals with a book set in a fictional Mittel-Europa city and the strange, obsessive lives of two young sisters who live there. Harrison ends her review with the comment: "[As] life becomes ever more shocking, we may need more than ever the fantastic in literature to evoke the true and the terrible in what we are pleased to call everyday reality." Michael Pye's positive review of Paco Ignacio Taibo's *Returning as Shadows* comes under the headline: "In a noirish novel set in 1941, elements of magic realism infuse wartime intrigue."

Two slightly negative reviews in the Books in Brief section also deal with works containing a fantastic or surreal element: McSweeney's *Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, edited by Michael Chabon ("an uneven, somewhat gentrified treasury"), and *The Afterword* by Mike Bryan ("the book amounts to an anxious monologue"). All things considered, this isn't a bad ratio. None of the books are treated with undue hostility. Harrison's comment about the uses of fantasy is right on the money. True, no Gene Wolfe. But no grim realism, either. I would note that a recent edition of Tolkien's *The Return of the King* bears a vintage positive blurb from *The New York Times*.

As for Updike vs. Wolfe: Wolfe (whom I admire) may or may not be generally under-appreciated, but it still seems worth mentioning that one of Updike's most popular novels is *The Witches of*

more intense fantasy of Lovecraft and William Hope Hodgson, recovering the territory of *weird fiction*, as championed by China Miéville, from genre horror. While I find the negative attitude to big science of "weird fiction" a little alarming, I'm interested to note a parallel movement in more conventional fantasy forms, where instead of magic being invoked as an ancient protective power, the miraculous—as in Mary Gentle's *Ash*—becomes a threat that must be held at bay by special, chosen human beings. In Nancy Kritez's version, the *Mages'* magic is implicitly identified not with the past, but with the planet-raping powers of modern industry and militarism. For a change it's the Christian-analog Old Faith (which resembles the ascetic Cathar heresy) who are (qualified) good guys. However, it's too soon to start guessing what conclusions the writer means to draw. Time will tell, for of course this is only the first episode of an epic adventure.

In many ways, *Fires of the Faithful* is a standard historical fantasy adventure (or rather, the first episode of an adventure). There are long and footsore journeys; pretty, archaic clothes; simple meals; aching moments of tragedy; and unexpected kindness on the road. There's a well-researched setting—in this case, I'd say Renaissance Italy, maybe in the time of the Guelph and Ghibelline wars—through which references to the postmodern present can be read (institutionalized refugee camps, the threat of environmental disaster). The romance is lesbian, which is

sufficiently heterodox in this culture for narrative tension. By the end of this volume, armed uprising against the forces of evil has begun, albeit in the low-key form of a revolt of displaced persons against a refugee-camp garrison. I thought it was rather a pity that the passionate, politically engaged super-witch Mira vanished so soon. I felt that Eiana, who favors understatement and tends to keep her emotions controlled, was not the ideal narrator, especially not for the incidents around her own rise to power. A schoolgirl stranded in a national disaster, she can't understand why she's been chosen as general of the revolutionary guerrillas. Frankly, from her report of the situation, neither could I.

I hope I've conveyed that there's a very readable, if familiar, story being told here, and an attractive new fantasy writer is always something worthy of note. But I think the reason *Fires of the Faithful* has been widely praised has very little to do with the scenario, the characters, or the prospect of finding out what happens to the young super-witch and her champion. What raises this conventionally romantic "good read" novel above the crowd is the sheer quality of the writing, the living dialogue, and the delivery of emotion. I suspect that, in time, Naomi Kritez may look back on *Fires of the Faithful* as an apprentice work. Probably she'll think of much better and more original ways to dress her ideas, more skilful ways of using the real cultures of the past, but this is a very promising beginning. ►

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Eastwick, a deft satirical fantasy.

There's a standard scapegoat for this (alleged) sorry state of pro-grim realism/anti-fantasy affairs: Intellectuals. Rather 1930s, this. "You were taught [to love grim realism and hate fantasy] by your English teacher." Well, no, as a matter of fact, I wasn't. No one ever tried to teach me this. Even at Vassar, my highest grade for an English paper was given to an essay that compared James Brockden Brown's fascinating psychological thriller *Weiland* to Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror," and James Earl Jones, appearing at my class graduation, wished us farewell with the words: "May the Force be with you." Surely Schweitzer doesn't mean to suggest that English teachers en masse aren't aware of or don't approve of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville. Or does he simply think that these authors didn't write fantasy?

Let's assume, however, that Schweitzer was taught this, and that hundreds of English teachers across the land are determined to make kids love grim realism. I have a message for such teachers: Based on the recent popularity of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as on the adult Schweitzer's chosen milieu, your methods of indoctrination clearly suck.

"We can blame a lot of this on Henry James." No, we can blame a lot of this on fantasy fiction that is not merely badly written, but badly edited, badly published, badly illustrated, and badly marketed. We can blame *The Aspern Papers* on Henry James, a work from which, incidentally, contemporary authors in general could learn a great deal about wit, irony, psychological acuity, elegance, verve, sympathy, and atmosphere.

It is the nature of the fan to claim a higher value for what he likes simply because he likes it; it is the nature of a critic to look beyond this and try to qualify his opinions and find a context for them. I think that Schweitzer, generally a staunch proponent of the latter approach, has here fallen into the agitprop vagaries of fandom. How else could he wind up his general thesis with the claim that fantasy is for writing about the big issues—courage, honor, memory, identity, power, forgiveness, free will vs. predestination and so forth?

Of course it is—the history of fantasy fiction makes this clear. But so is fiction like *War and Peace*, *Middlemarch*, *Bullet Park*, *Henry V*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Invisible Man*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The House of Mirth*, *The City and the Pillars*, *The Riders in the Chariot*, and *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, so is fiction—period. To claim otherwise is to indulge in a fantasy of a most grim—and I think self-limiting—sort.

I agree with you that Darrell indulges in some exaggeration about the current level of animosity between the Literary Establishment and the worlds of fantasy and science fiction, and I have discussed this with him periodically over the course of our friendship. His perceptions are strongly influenced by his negative experiences in college in the early 1970s, when Henry James and Edmund Wilson's prejudices against the supernatural and the fantastic were still very much in play. My experience in the mid-'80s was substantially different: The prejudice was less universal; I was able to complete my BA in English only because a course in Fantasy precisely fit my divisional requirements; and one of my professors—a celebrated Eliot scholar—was delighted that someone in his class understood his own allusion to H. P. Lovecraft. Your experience, even more recent, was evidently even more positive.

However, I think that you are underestimating the divide that still exists. Two weeks ago as I write this, this paragraph appeared in the selfsame *New York Times Book Review*:

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be literature with a capital "L," and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. Some will ask, of course, whether there still is such a thing as "literature with a capital L." I proceed on the faith that there is. Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it. (Sven Birkerts, "Oryx and Crake: Present at the Re-Creation," 18 May 2003.)

It would certainly be possible to more explicitly embrace the ideas that "John Updike is taken very seriously indeed and Gene Wolfe, say, is not. It has little to do with the quality of their writing," but it would not be easy. I would not care to say that Sven Birkerts is the Voice of the Establishment—though in his position at Harvard, he certainly has a good claim to being such—but he was, at the very least, allowed his dismissive comment without the editors of the *Book Review* reining him in.—KJM

Look, You Think You've Got Troubles . . .

It really takes me back to the good old days, the early years of the NTRSF Work Weekends, when our disasters were of epic proportions. Those were the days when every single month, one of the editors got mugged, or a computer got stolen, or someone fell in love, or decamped in anger, someone screamed, the hard disk got fried and died, the issue got deleted in a crash, the subscription list had to be reconstructed from individual scraps of paper. . . . I give only a few examples of those days of struggle and triumph. We always got the issue out, every single month.

There were signs of difficulty with this weekend beginning on Wednesday, when staffer Arthur Hlavaty experienced a car crash that left him unharmed but the vehicle totaled. But hey, Tavis Allison was returning for the Weekend after a year away following the birth of his son, Javi. Christine Quinones helped out on Friday evening despite getting caught in the chaos of the Pleasantville Firemen's Parade. Joe Berlant would be by for part of the weekend, Friday and Sunday, and newcomers Phil Stern and Christine Giordano would be here. All these were in addition to Work Weekend stalwarts Vicki Rosenzweig, Eugene Reynolds, and Eugene Surowitz, so it looked like a fun, well-attended, productive weekend, in spite of the forecast for continuing rain.

Things were going smoothly at 3:30 on Saturday afternoon, everyone here and reading manuscripts, soaking rain falling steadily. Kathryn and I and the kids got in the van and went grocery shopping. Minutes after we left, without benefit of wind or the aid of a wandering vehicle, a large tree gave up the ghost about a block away and fell over, nately taking out all the power, phone, and cable service in the neighborhood. We came home at 4:15 with cookout supplies to a dark neighborhood, the next street blocked by a fire engine.

As I write, at 11 A.M. on Sunday, June 1, the telephone lines here have been out of service since about 4 P.M. yesterday. The electricity came back first, shortly after 9 P.M., after we spent five hours editing and proofing by fading sunlight and candlelight on the screened back porch while rain fell unceasingly and the temperature fell just as steadily. The cable connection to the cable modem came back just before midnight Saturday, allowing us to check facts and publication data, but we had no e-mail without the phone lines on our main computer, until late today, when we transferred some files to another computer to get email out through the cable modem. Thus we can ask for approvals of edits, ask for and receive minor changes in reviews and essays, and so forth.

And what with the various delays, we didn't finish laying out this issue until 4:15 A.M. Sunday. That was hard. But in the looniness of sleep deprivation and near-total fall-over-and-lie-there, Kevin Maroney and I giggled madly, observing that this was about the same time we had finished the previous issue, and significantly earlier than the one before that, each time because of unexpected delays and unique conditions. And that this was in danger of being situation normal.

These are the good old days. ▲

—David G. Hartwell
& the Editors

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